

# JEEVADHARA

*A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION*

PROPHETS IN DIALOGUE

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THE THEOLOGICAL SITUATION NOW  
IN MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

*Thomas Michel*

JESUS IN THE QU'RAN

*Mathew Paraplackal*

THE ZEAL AND THE SEAL OF THE PROPHETS

*Kenneth Cragg*

MUHAMMAD AS LIBERATOR

*Asghar Ali Engineer*

WOMEN IN ISLAM: SPIRIT AND PROGRESS

*Zeenat Shaukat Ali*

THE ACTUAL DIFFICULTIES OF THE DIALOGUE  
BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS

*Maurice Borrmans*

DISCUSSION FORUM: BIBLE ON SUFFERING

*J. B. Chethimattam*

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**PROPHETS IN DIALOGUE**

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## CONTENTS

	Page
Editorial	155
The Theological Situation now in Muslim-Christian Dialogue <i>Thomas Michel</i>	157
Jesus in the Qu'ran <i>Mathew Paraplackal</i>	167
The Prophets' Zeal as well as their Seal <i>Kenneth Cragg</i>	179
Muhammad as Liberator <i>Asghar Ali Engineer</i>	189
Women in Islam: Spirit and Progress <i>Zeenat Shaukat Ali</i>	202
Difficulties of the Dialogue between Christians and Muslims <i>Maurice Borrmans</i>	212
Discussion Forum: Bible on Suffering <i>J. B. Chethimattam</i>	229

## Editorial

In the first article, Thomas Michel is describing for us an important aspect of the context in which theology is done today, and christology is being reconceived and reformulated. The Asian context is defined mainly by religious pluralism and by socio-economic exploitation which creates and maintains extensive poverty and misery. The strong presence of Islam in Asia is a significant part of the religious context which shapes our theological effort. The atmosphere and the horizon indicated by Michel must be kept in mind while reading further in this issue of *Jeevadhara*. Christological concerns cannot be separated from the dialogical. Nor indeed from the practical. Michel's emphasis on the issues of Faith in society, on justice and human dignity, as against speculative discussion of doctrines and concepts, to promote dialogue and understanding is particularly noteworthy and welcome.

Mathew Paraplackal sums up for us all the significant Qur'anic data concerning Jesus. The article is more than a summary providing information. It is a perceptive presentation, meaning to provoke critical reflection on both sides of the dialogical line. It prepares us for the discussion of two christological themes which follow: prophecy and liberation. Two themes which are also basic to Islam: Muhammad is God's Prophet; Jesus is prophet too. Both are faithful witnesses and messengers of the Most High. Both suffer for their uncompromising fidelity to the One Who taught them and sent them. A fidelity the challenge of which we stand badly in need of. All this is discussed in depth by Bishop Kenneth Cragg, noted writer on Islam's faith and spirituality. Christian faith in Christ can be

illuminated by life-significance within prophethood as found in Islam. Being is inseparable from saying, and the Person from his or her Message. By now we know that what corresponds in Islam to Christ is not Muhammad but the Qur'an, God's Word spoken into history. Is the Arabian Prophet's role, then, analogous to that of Mary of Nazareth?

The second theme discussed here is that of liberation. Asghar Ali Engineer traces for us the undermining of oppressive traditions and the setting free of people by the insightful Prophet and his forceful Message. The social, religious and psychological change brought about was a veritable revolution, profound in its effects and its lasting appeal. The theme is continued in another contribution from Bombay, but focussed this time on the liberation of Women. Zeenat Shuakat Ali's article examines the contribution made by the Prophet and the Qur'an to the liberation of women held captive in the degrading conditions of those days. The author also shows how in a later period of time this liberation came to be subverted, just as the liberation and newness brought by Jesus was also reversed in later "christian" history.

The actual difficulties in the way of dialogue between Muslims and Christians are presented and discussed in a careful study by Maurice Borrmans. The difficulties are real and many. Precisely therefore they call for new efforts and engender new hope.

This is one more step in Jeevadhara's modest attempt at participating in the developing dialogue between religions, and especially in the ongoing christian endeavour to clarify the conditions and the language in which we could speak meaningfully of Jesus the Christ of God.

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# **The Theological Situation now in Muslim-Christian Dialogue**

There is no doubt that in the past 25 years, Christians and Muslims have been meeting oftener and discussing their faith at a deeper level than had been done for centuries. A history and evaluation of these encounters can be found elsewhere. Hence it is not necessary to recount the dates and places and proceedings of recent meetings between Muslims and Christians. What is important to note is that after this quarter-century of mutual study and reflection, some of the theological issues which divide Christians and Muslims have been brought into sharper focus, new areas of unsuspected convergence have appeared and, what is possibly the most important, new and better ways of asking questions have emerged. In this paper, I would like to review the state of the theological dialogue between Christians and Muslims today, with a view towards where this dialogue might be heading in the future.

## **I. Faith and Salvation**

The recent dialogue has raised this fundamental question in a new way and colors the whole approach which Christians bring to their encounter with Muslims and vice versa. The traditional position of both Christians and Muslims has been "exclusive" in religious matters. The Christians held that salvation was possible only to those who had accepted Jesus as Son of God and Savior of the world. This position was paralleled in Islam, which Muslims saw as the only "Straight Path" leading to God and "whoever takes up other than Islam

as his religion, it will not be accepted from him" (Qur'an. 3 35).

This exclusivist position set its own agenda in dialogue. The Christian who believes that a Muslim is damned unless he accepts the truth of Christianity, or the Muslim who believes that no religion but Islam is acceptable to God, can only have one purpose in dialogue, that is, to try to convince the other of the truth of his faith so that the other might be among the recipients of God's pardon and saving mercy. This view has inspired centuries of polemics between Christians and Muslims and, it must be noted, has its own inner consistency.

This position presupposes an understanding of truth and its relation to religious faith which was largely unexamined until the recent experiments in dialogue. The supposition is that the truth of Islamic (or Christian) faith will be evident to anyone who is properly confronted with the evidence and who conscientiously responds with intellectual honesty and religious sincerity. One who has heard the message of Islam or Christianity and who persists in his error, must be ruled, by unworthy motives, such as a "stiff-necked pride", worldly allegiances to family, nation, or personal position or an unwillingness to accept the spiritual and practical rigors of the new faith.

Experiences of dialogue have challenged this view for many Muslims and Christians. They have discovered their partners to be persons of deep religious conviction and moral uprightness, whose openness to truth, intellectual capabilities and sense of the divine are comparable to their own. Sometimes it is with surprise that they learn that their partners may surpass them in some of these qualities. Nevertheless, the other has not been convinced by their arguments and remains firmly, possibly even more deeply, committed to the faith which he or she brought to the dialogue encounter.

The awareness that reality is in conflict with their assumptions has led many Christians and Muslims to

reinvestigate the sources of their own faith and to formulate new "inclusive" positions. Muslims have found in the Qur'an passages which affirm the possibility of eternal reward for the Christian or Jew who conscientiously follows his religious faith and does good works. Qur'anic verses such as 5:69 and 2:62 (paraphrased above), 29:46, in which Muslims are exhorted to dispute with the People of the Book only in what is better, and 5:47, in which the People of the Gospel are to be judged by what has been revealed to them have been alleged by Muslims to lay the basis for an inclusivist approach to other faiths.

In a similar way, Christians have found scriptural arguments which admit the possibility that people other than they may attain final salvation. However this inclusivist approach presumes that Christ has won salvation for all mankind and that Christianity is theologically, if not sociologically, the "normal" way of salvation for mankind. In Islam, the inclusivist position holds that although Islam is the final, perfect religion desired by God, those who have not arrived at this truth, but who follow what they think to be correct, to the best of their ability, will have nothing to fear from God's judgment. This was already stated in medieval times by Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya, but today Christian-Muslim dialogue has given new impetus to theological reflections in this direction.

For some Muslims and Christians, the experience of dialogue, with its requirements of full respect and esteem for the other, has led them to what is usually called a "pluralist" position. Each religion provides in itself a comprehensive response to God, and even the apparent contradictions among them are somehow resolved within the infinite wisdom of God. On the last Day, the Qur'an teaches, God will inform us about that about which we had disputed. In his work, *The Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Fazlur Rahman suggests that religious pluralism, at least among Jews, Christians and Muslims, may have been willed by God as an incen-

tive for believers to compete with one another in doing good.

For Christians, Muslim-Christian dialogue has underlined the need for more reflection and research on the "theology of religions", so that Christians can understand more clearly *how* God's Spirit is at work among Muslims through the fonts and practices of the Islamic faith. This means viewing the Islamic tradition and the life of the Muslim community today not as an exercise in comparative religions or "good neighborliness", but as an effort to observe the salvific action of the Spirit. For Muslims, the effort must be made to bring together the whole of Qur'anic teaching about other religions into a modern synthesis which is faithful to the text and spirit of the Qur'an and, at the same time, cognizant of the lessons learned from the modern experience of dialogue. To the Christian, the Qur'an (and the Muslim community formed by it), seems to present a bewildering approach to non-Muslims, now regarding them as *mu'minun*, now as *mushrikun*, now as *kafirun*. What is needed is a modern Ghazali or Ibn Taymiyya to sift the evidence anew to form a consistent and understandable Islamic theology of other religions.

## 2. Jesus and Muhammad

For centuries, a continuing source of tension and misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims has been the way in which the followers of the two religions regard the "founders" of each other. Muslims have often placed the question in a straightforward manner: "We Muslims greatly honor Jesus, and accept him as a true prophet. Why do Christians not similarly honor our prophet, Muhammad"? Certainly, Christians, whose tradition from medieval times until the recent past included defamatory statements and writings about Muhammad, are more ready today to recognize him as a man of God and his Qur'an as a work of high spiritual motivation and value.

Yet Christians in dialogue with Muslims are surprised

and disappointed when their partners are not satisfied with this neutral response which seems to avoid the crucial issue. Was Muhammad a prophet or not, and is the Qur'an God's revelation or not? For the followers of Islam, the central, crucial event of human history was God's revealing His final, perfect message to mankind through the messengership of Muhammad. If Christians deny this, what is there left to talk about?

On the other hand, Christians are not greatly reassured or satisfied by the Muslim acceptance of the prophethood of Jesus. It is true that Jesus' prophethood is affirmed by the Gospels, but for Christians it is the twin happenings of the Incarnation and Redemption which are essential and crucial to their understanding of Jesus. One might say that for Christians, the central event of human history was God's incarnating His eternal word in the man Jesus and the redemptive nature of his life and death, and God's raising him to new life. When Muslims deny this, their honoring Jesus as a prophet may be gratifying, but basically misplaced; the very reason for the Christian's abiding faith in Jesus is denied, so what remains to be discussed?

This impasse can only be resolved through the patient and diligent efforts of Muslim and Christian thinkers. Both must realize from the start that the relative positions of Jesus and Muhammad in the understanding of their followers are not equivalent. It has been suggested that the role played in Christianity by Jesus, in whom God's eternal word became human, finds its parallel in Islam, not in Muhammad but in the Qur'an. For Muslims, it is the Qur'an which expresses in a perfect way God's eternal Word, much as Jesus does for Christians. The books of the New Testament, as inspired human professions of faith which point to the revelation in Jesus, interpreting it and applying it in a normative way to the exigencies of daily life, are more closely equivalent to the Islamic *hadith*, which provide Muslims in the *sunna* of Muhammad, normative guidelines for "living" the Qur'anic teaching. These parallels are ap-

proximate and cannot be pushed too far, but they may help Christians to understand, for example, why Muslims are as opposed to a critical textual analysis of the Qur'an as Christians would be to a psychoanalytic case study of Jesus.

Some Christians have begun to explore questions of extra-Biblical prophecy and the possibilities of post-Christian revelation. H. Kung's widely discussed article in the *Harvard Theological Review* makes a tentative effort to understand Muhammad's message and Qur'anic revelation within a Christian theological context. The problem arises from the fact that, as Muslims and Christians have discovered in dialogue, the terms "prophecy" and "revelation" carry analogous but not identical meaning for the followers of the two Faiths. For Christians to admit prophethood to Muhammad and a revealed character to the Qur'an in their Islamic connotations would be to accept claims to absolute authority and literal inerrancy which they would not even claim for their own Scriptures.

The Christian understanding of 'prophecy is complex. On the one hand, Jesus puts an end to the "line of prophets" by fulfilling the hopes and expectations of the Hebrew prophets. On the other hand, the Pentecost experience of the early Christians was understood as a fulfilment of Joel's vision that in the last days prophecy would become universal, with young and old, women and men, all moved by the prophetic spirit. Was this Spirit also at work, many centuries later in the life of Muhammad, and can the Qur'an be seen as the result of this action of grace? This is one of the questions which arise from the experience of dialogue which will be occupying Christian theologians in coming years.

The triune nature of God and Jesus' relationship to the Father are two issues which have aroused heated debate in Muslim-Christian encounters, and one can presume that the differing faith visions will remain. The recent dialogue has shown, however, the inade-

quacy of much of the human terminology and formulation which has been developed over the centuries. The almost inevitable misunderstandings of Christian trinitarian belief which result from the modern application of 'personhood' to God have been outlined by K. Rahner in his important article "Oneness and Three-foldness of God in Discussion with Islam" (cf. *Vidyajyoti* 46 (1982) 366-379). To Muslims, (as to many Christians) "one God in three persons" means a committee of three people who are individual *loci* of intellect, will, and decision.

The medieval Arab Christian theologians, whose theology was developed in the context of their discussions with Muslims, never employed the misleading term *shakhs* (person) in relation to God, but preferred to speak of one God in three *aqanim* (forms), *sifat* (aspects), or *asma* (names). Modern Christian theologians, following the cautions indicated by Rahner, are attempting to avoid accusations of implicit Sabellianism in the use of such terminology by stressing that these aspects of divine life and activity are essential, eternal and intrinsic characteristics of the One God. Other theologians, rejecting the philosophic categories of the early Councils as inadequate, stress the "economic trinity", in which the one transcendent God (whom Jesus taught his followers to call "Father") has two ways of being and acting in the created universe: His once-for-all, time incarnation of His message in the man Jesus and His all-embracing, active, immanent presence in the cosmos (which Christians call the Spirit).

It is unlikely that Muslims, with their deep faith commitment to the numerical unity of God, will ever accept any Christian formulation of God's trinitarian oneness, but it is possible that, through dialogue, they may come to see that Christian formulations are human efforts to profess the monotheism handed down to them from Jesus and his disciples. Similarly, the Christian who believes Islamic monotheism to be "lacking" in understanding of God's salvific activity and immanent presence in history can,

through dialogue, realize that it is about the "predicates" by which each describe God, rather than the "subject", that is, the One and Same God, that Muslims and Christians disagree.

While Muslims have challenged Christians to employ more coherent terminology and concepts in their formulation of the triune God, Christians in turn have been challenging Muslims to move beyond their respect for Jesus as prophet and examine more deeply the message which he brought and embodied. Christians feel that Muslims may have excused themselves from reflecting on the message of Jesus contained in the Gospels by an unexamined dismissal of these works as corrupted. All the Qur'anic accusations of *tahrif* (2:75, 4:46, 5:13, 5:41) are directed at Jews and seem to bear the meaning of misinterpreting words out of their proper context. The whole question of *tahrif al-lafz* (verbal corruption of the Scriptural text) is one in which Christians and Muslims must still move from their polemical positions to examine together in a common search for truth.

### 3. Religion and Society

The experience of the recent decades of Muslim-Christian dialogue has convinced many followers of the two religions that such theological issues will lead to a dead end of sterile reformulations if the central concern of both parties does not remain fixed on issues of faith in society. Both Islam and Christianity give to their followers guidance and firm principles for approaching the political, economic, social, and familial problems of society. The question of justice is of great importance in both Islam and in Christianity, as is that of human dignity. In a world where both values are trampled upon, to an alarming extent, Christians and Muslims have much to discuss in an effort to understand better the reasons for injustice and violations of human dignity, and to see how the values which each find in their faith can direct their communitarian efforts to confront these evils.

Both Muslims and Christians agree that faith in God cannot be limited to interior, other-worldly piety. God's will is not to be carried out only in the personal and familial sphere. They agree that politics, economics and business and social structures and relationships should all be influenced by religious values. But moving from this conviction to a point where active co-operative efforts can be made to reconstruct society according to faith values demands an analytic expertise and practical commitment which has so far largely escaped the two communities.

Although the followers of the two religions are agreed on the principle that faith should influence societal structures to defend and advance the lot of the poor, marginalized and victims of discrimination, they have often discovered among themselves sharp difference of opinion and action concerning how this is to be done. Muslims hold that the Islamic *shari'a* has within it a divinely taught model for an upright, just, and humane society. Injustices have arisen in society because the prescriptions of the *shari'a* are disregarded, even by Muslim political and economic leaders. If what is needed is a return to the spirit and regulations of the *shari'a*, how is this to be done? To what extent should the *shari'a* rules be protected and enforced by civil law? In other words, to what extent should the *shari'a* replace the existing civil law of secular origin as the legal basis for societies and nations? Is it legitimate and desirable that *shari'a* regulations precede a thoroughgoing renewal of Muslim society that would be Islamic not only in name but in actual reality?

These questions, which are heatedly debated among Muslims, tend to be viewed with some apprehension by Christians. Although Christians in their history have known various forms of religion-state relationship — from the Caesaropapism of Byzantine times to the theocracies of the Papal States or Calvin's Geneva, — most Christians today favour a secularization of

politics, with a clear separation between the religious and political spheres, as the form of government which gives the greatest likelihood of preserving human rights especially for minorities, in a modern pluralistic world. However, the very secularization of politics which frees communities of believers from control and interference by the state makes it more difficult for believers to influence the values by which society is shaped.

It seems to be in areas of public morality, such as corruption of government officials and the just redistribution of wealth, at the level of nations, and in matters of trans-national economics, such as those of banking and repayment of debts, profit-oriented arms marketing, and North-South exploitation, that the Muslim and the Christian communities have been least successful in instilling in their members a sense of the ethical issues and a religiously-based moral alternative. Islamic-Christian dialogue, which has heretofore tended to revolve about questions of speculative theology and unresolved polemical controversies handed down from the past, must take these issues of religion and society much more seriously if it is to have any relevance to the pressing needs of our time. Christians and Muslims each have much to say to each other on these matters and, one would hope, many bases for common action, if the necessary level of trust can be built. What is needed today is not so much the refining and deepening of doctrinal concerns as a broadening of the scope of the dialogue to address together the real problems of modern life and religious response.

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## Jesus in the Qur'an

Neither the Muslim nor the Christian thinks that he has the need to search for Jesus in the Scriptures of the other. What a Muslim sees as a chronological advantage of the Qur'an over the New Testament excuses his disregard for the Christian Scriptures. In addition, the claim of the Qur'an to know the truth and to set things aright where the Christians quarrel and differ (19:34,37; 43:65) gives him a good conscience when he rejects the Christian dogma on Jesus. The Christian, being conscious of his prerogative (he should know whom he is named after), cannot afford to be taught by an outsider what he should think of Jesus, however persistently the Muslim recites to him Qur'an verses calling into question the central article of Christian faith. Evidences that the Qur'anic Christology (this expression is not unjustified, seeing that the Qur'an offers its own interpretation of what was known about Jesus) has been taken seriously in a positive sense or even noticed by Christian theologians, are not overwhelming, not to say absent. To mention only one example, in what is considered to be a standard work on Christology by Walter Kasper, the Qur'an is unknown.

This short presentation does not pretend to take the side of the one or the other. The title is understood as a search for information. The Qur'an does know a lot about Jesus, which knowledge it has scattered in fifteen of its present chapters or, better known, *suras*. The ninety-three verses which deal with Jesus present a rounded-up and, for a Muslim, total picture of Jesus. The Christian reader does well to note that the main concern of the Sacred Book of the Muslims is not with Jesus, and that

even among the prophetic personages that people it, Jesus does not receive the greatest attention. Moses wins in contrast a goodly number of 502 verses.

That is not to say that the emotional impact of the subject on both groups has been correspondingly low, quite the contrary. The Qur'an is appalled to hear what Christians say about Jesus. Following its cue, the Muslim has a feeling of abhorrence and indignation when he hears expressions like Incarnation, the divine Sonship of Jesus, and the Trinity falling unassumingly from the mouth of a Christian. A Christian's search for the Qur'anic Jesus should at least acquaint him with this sensitivity of a Muslim. The Christian on the other hand feels that the Qur'an gives the lie to the dogmatic basis of his faith and hope. There is no guarantee that the sharing of information makes anyone feel better.

Despite the kind words the Qur'an has for Christians (5:82), there is no way around the dogmatic wall that divides them from the Muslims. Christians call Jesus the Son of God, the Second Person in the Trinity, being of the same divine substance as the Creator-God whom they call the Father. Muslims find this revolting; they reject this Christology which amounts to committing the worst sin known in the Qur'an *shirk*, associating partners with the one God. The Qur'an suggests instead an alternative Christology. The limited scope of this presentation allows only a sketchy drawing of the Qur'anic picture of Jesus, which hopes to serve as an appetizer.

Jesus, son of Mary: Jesus is born of Mary through an extraordinary intervention from God. Chosen and purified by God, (3:45) Mary is to conceive Jesus directly through the creative Word of God, without the participation of a man. "When she had withdrawn from her people to a chamber looking East, and had chosen seclusion from them", there God sent to her a messenger who assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man. "He

said: I am only a messenger of thy Lord, that I may bestow on thee a faultless son. She said: How can I have a son, when no mortal hath touched me, neither have I been unchaste? He said: So (it will be) Thy Lord saith: It is easy for me. And (it will be) that We may make of him a revelation for mankind and a mercy from us, and it is a thing ordained. And she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a far place ." (19:10-22, Translation by Pickthall) Even if the Christian Theologians and Exegetes should want to interpret the Gospel narratives relating to the virgin birth of Jesus as a language of symbol and myth, the Qur'an is likely to hold fast to it as a divinely revealed truth on which there can be no discussion. The husband of Mary, Joseph, is absent from the Qur'anic narrative, thus sparing the Muslim the straining of his phantasy. Mary had fortified herself against any man (21:91; 66:12) so that only a divine act comes into question. God breathes his Spirit into Mary's womb. The child thus born is called the Spirit of God (4:171). Being called into existence by the creative Word of God, Jesus is also named the Word of God. The Christian reader would gladly hear more meaning in these epithets. The Qur'an does not warrant it. The birth of Jesus is a miracle, a sign (21:91), but not of Jesus divinity. It is God's creative power that is manifested in the birth of Jesus, a power that was also revealed at the creation of Adam. "Lo! the likeness of Jesus with Allah is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then he said unto him: Be! and he was (3:59).

One may trace back effortlessly the major features of the Qur'anic narrative on the childhood of Jesus and the youth of Mary to the Protoevangelium of James and the Arabic version of the Childhood Gospel of Thomas. The Muslim with his understanding of the divine origin of every statement in the Qur'an may take offense at this escavatory zeal. The Qur'an itself, in my estimation, would be offended only if one fails to register what it is at pains to assert, namely, that Jesus is a creature, called

into existence by God's creative power, that Jesus has no share in the Divine Nature.

Jesus, the Prophet: In the Qur'an Jesus takes his place in the ranks of the Prophets (2:136; 3:84; 5:46; 5:75; 6:85 etc.) who preach from the beginning of time till its end the same message of the One God, besides Whom there is no other. After being made to take an oath (33:7) the Prophets are sent by God in every age to every people to call them to submission (Islam) to Him who shows them the Straight Path (2:142-43:64 etc.). Jesus is sent in his time to the people of Israel (3:49) to preach to them, which mission he begins already in the cradle (3:46) Jesus is not burdened with a new message. He is to confirm what came before. "And I come confirming that which was before me of the Torah, and to make lawful some of that which was forbidden unto you" (3:50). Certain prohibitions were said to have been part of the divine punishment against the hard-heartedness of the Israelites (cf. 4:160) As a Prophet, Jesus does not proclaim himself as the message, rather, he has a mission that goes beyond himself. Part of it is announcing the good news of the coming of a messenger after him, whose name is "ahmad" (61:6). Whether this word is to be written with capital A or small a is a question of no mean importance, that is to say, understood as a noun or as an adjective — the Praised One (Pickthall) or one with a praiseworthy name (Paret). That 'ahmad' and Muhammad are derived from the same root has been eagerly interpreted by Muslims as a prophecy on the coming of the Arabian Prophet. Christian authors since the days of Marracci (writing in 1698) are glad to find in 'ahmad' the *parakletos* of John 14 hidden. The Greek adjective *periklytos* meaning famous (not far from 'ahmad') lends itself to this reconstruction.

God inspires Jesus with the same prophetic inspiration given to the Prophets before him — and Muhammad after him (cf. 4:163). To some of God's messengers, God gave a Book: to Moses the Torah, to David the Psalms (4:163); Jesus is said to have received the Gospel (3:48; 5:46; 19:30) just as on Muhammad is sent down the Qur'an. That no

mention of Jesus ever having to do with a Holy Book named the Gospel is found in the narratives familiar to Christians is, like many other things that they say of Jesus, irrelevant to the purpose of the Qur'an. Among the Prophets God has professedly some favorites (2:253), and if we are to judge from the number of references in the Qur'an, they are Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. There can however be no doubt that Muhammad, and Muslims after him think that the greatest one to bear that title is not among them. None of these, however, is more than a Prophet.

Jesus like Muhammad has a special assignment to clarify issues on which his people are divided. In this capacity Jesus is to formulate his message, as will be seen later. "When Jesus came with clear proofs (of Allah's sovereignty) he said: I have come unto you with wisdom, and to make plain some of that concerning which ye differ. So keep your duty to Allah, and obey me" (43:63). That Jesus is and is only, a Prophet of God is the quintessence of Qur'anic Christology. As a Prophet, the history and the experience of Jesus are made to fit into the pattern known to the Qur'an as typifying all prophetic experience. A messenger of God cannot afford too many individual characteristics. Accordingly, a Prophet sent to his people is received by the rich and the powerful with antagonism (34:34; 43:23). They call him a liar and a sorcerer (kadhdhaba=to call someone a liar, something a lie, is one of the most frequently occurring verbs in the Qur'an; for sorcery 5:110; 10:76; 24:43 etc.). Jesus too is met with disbelief (3:52:61 14) "...when thou camest unto them with clear proofs and those of them who disbelieved exclaimed. This is naught else than mere magic" (5:110). Confronted with opposition, Jesus invites disciples to help him. "Who will be my helpers in the cause of Allah? The disciples said; We will be Allah's helpers. We believe in Allah and bear thou witness that we have surrendered (unto Him)" (3:52). This last sentence loses its power of association in the translation. When we leave the Arabic nouns untranslated it gives us: We are the *Ansar* of Allah, and bear thou witness that we are Muslims. Both have their origin in the immediate history

of Muhammad. Even without this hint, one would readily gain the impression that the stories of Prophets before Muhammad supply the framework to present his own experience in an ever recurring cycle. This standardised prophetology and its attendant view of salvation history in the Qur'an blur the distinguishing features of the prophetic personalities in favor of a compelled universalism. Muhammad's concern was not to analyse the past, but rather to confront and master his present.

Whether it is lack of interest or of information that leaves the major part of Jesus' life and teaching untouched must remain an open question. The Qur'an knows that Jesus preached. The content of his sermons is supplied by the Qur'an from its own inner source. It also knows to tell about his healing activities, even if summarily. "I heal him who was born blind and the leper, and I raise the dead, by Allah's leave" (3:49). Some of the miracles of Jesus in the Qur'an are not known in this form to the authors of the canonical Gospels. They are, his speaking from the cradle to vindicate his mother against calumny of her people and to proclaim his true identity and mission (19:30); his making of a bird out of clay; and telling what people eat and store up in their houses without his seeing it (3:49); and bringing down a banquet from heaven at the request of his disciples (3:111-114. For apocryphal sources see Parrinder, 83ff., Schumann 45, fn 49). The Qur'an appends these miracles with its own commentary: "with God's permission", making it thus impossible for anyone to conclude from them to the presence of divinity in Jesus.

The most puzzling chapter in Qur'an's Christology is its teaching on Jesus' death. Here again is God's hand at work like at his birth. It has indeed been the lot of some of God's Prophets to be killed by their enemies (2:87; 4:155), but in the case of Jesus the plots of the opponents did not work, God is cleverer in plotting (3:54). His enemies proclaimed triumphantly that they "slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary. Allah's messenger. They slew

him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them, ... they slew him not for certain. But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah is ever Mighty, wise" (4:157-8). God prevented the Israelites to lay hands on him (5:110). The verses dealing with the death of Jesus (4:159; 5:17 etc.) convey the impression that Jesus' real death is yet to take place at the end of time when he will die a natural death and be raised to life at the general resurrection of the dead. God, who has patronised Jesus his messenger, not his enemies, has the power to decide when Jesus should die (3:55). Blessed is to be the day when he will die and be raised to life (19:15). One may find here traces of Docetist or Gnostic (Basilides) teachings, but the Qur'an has its own reason to deny the death of Jesus on the cross. Defeat and abandonment of a messenger of God does not fit into the landscape of Qur'anic triumphalism. Another explanation is to be found in the polemical interest of the Qur'an against the Jews who appear on the scene as Muhammad's sworn enemies (5:82). They seemed to have made much of their success over Jesus (4:157).

These explanations may console a Christian, but the Qur'an nowhere betrays this intention. It sticks to its own logic, and has no inhibition to bypass history. A Christian's surprise at the Qur'an's denial of the cross of Jesus may make him suspicious of all that the Qur'an says about Jesus. The Qur'anic evidence, however, does not warrant this. Its Christology contains not only anti-Christian polemic. Jesus profiles in the Qur'an as a uniquely favoured Prophet. His birth, his miracles, his eschatological office (cf. 5:116) witness to an extraordinary empowering of Jesus by God. He is a "faultless son" (19:19), "a sign and a mercy from Us (God) to all people" (19:21; cf. also 21:91), "illustrious in the world and the Hereafter" (3:45). He belongs to those who are "brought near to God" (3:46), a description which the Qur'an uses otherwise for the Archangels (4:172). Righteous is he (3:46; 6:85) and blessed (19:31). God strengthens him with the Holy Spirit to preach the message

and perform miracles (2:87; 5:110. For a possible identification of the Qur'anic Holy Spirit with the angel Gabriel, see O'Shaughnessy, *The Spirit*), and teaches him "the Scripture and Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel" (5:110). None of these or other titles of favour and signs of special election is sufficient for the Qur'an to draw the conclusions on the person of Jesus which the Christian Theology has proposed. This reserve of the Qur'an must be repeatedly called to mind when anyone is tempted to argue on the basis that the most "Christian" of Jesus' titles namely the Christ, the Messiah known to the Qur'an in the Arabic adaptation of the Syrian *m.shihah - al Masih*—occurs in it several times (cf. 3:45; 4:157; 4:171-2; 5:17-75). There is no reason to suppose that the presence of this loaded title in the Qur'an suggests that it subscribes to what the Christian Dogma associates it with. The Qur'an discovers at a later stage in its development, in the Medinan period, that is to say, that Jesus the Son of Mary has also another name—*al Masih*.

Jesus, the Servant of God: We have already seen what the Qur'an understands by titles like the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Better integrated into the Qur'an's inner structure are Jesus' functional names Prophet (19:30), and Messenger of God (4:171; 61:6). However, the correction which the Qur'an is committed to give to the Christian teaching on Jesus is nowhere so emphatically expressed as in the name "Servant", which Jesus himself is shown to have preferred. Already in the cradle, Jesus makes a clear statement of his identity. "He spake: Lo! I am the slave of Allah..." (19:30) The Arabic word is *'abd* which can be translated slave or servant. He repeats this confession at the Last Judgement (cf. 5:117). The essence of Jesus' preaching is his submission that God is his and everyone's Lord. "Lo! Allah is my Lord and your Lord, so worship him. This is a straight path" (3:51; also 5:72; 43:64). Jesus is a servant of God, whom He has specially favoured to make him an example of a true Muslim to the Children of Israel (43:

59). He obeys the divine command to pray, to give alms, and to be dutiful to his mother who bore him (19:31-32). He is humble before God, and does not scorn to be His Servant (4:172) Herein lies the root of the Qur'an's vehement rejection of what it considers to be an unpardonably high-handed claim that Jesus is God. To make Jesus who is a creature and a servant of God equal to the Creator and Lord militates against its sense of the absolute transcendence of God. "They indeed have disbelieved who say: Lo! Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary. Say: who then can do aught against Allah, if He had willed to destroy the Messiah, son of Mary and his mother and everyone on earth? Allah's is the Sovereignty of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. He createth what He will. And Allah is Able to do all things." (5:17; also 72)

The responsibility for divinizing Jesus, and surprisingly his mother too, lies entirely with his followers. The Qur'an acquits Jesus of any. "And when Allah saith: O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah? he saith: be glorified! It was not mine to utter that to which I had no right. If I used to say it, then Thou knewest it. Thou knowest what is in my mind, and I know not what is in Thy mind. Lo! Thou, only Thou art the Knower of Things Hidden. I spake unto them only that which Thou commandedst me (saying): Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord..." (5:116-7) This verse leaves the impression that the Qur'an pictured to itself the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a kind of divine Holy Family. How Mary found her way into the Trinity has been explained as the result of sectarian influences (Schumann, 41; Rudolf, 87; Parrinder, 134ff.; Schedl, 523-7). Expression like the Mother of God, and the affinity of the Holy Spirit to the feminine has served to perfect the confusion.

Whoever be the Persons in the Trinity, the Qur'an will have none of it. God is One. The Qur'an refuses to convince itself that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity does not undermine the absolute Unity of God. "O people of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor

utter aught concerning Allaḥ save the truth...and say not 'Three' - Cease! (it is) better for you! — Allah is only One God..." (4:171). By saying so, Christians join the ranks of unbelievers, despite their special status as People of the Book. "They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the third of three: when there is no God save the One God. If they desist not from so saying, a painful doom will fall on those of them who disbelieve" (5:73). The Christian belief seems to the Qur'an to threaten its message of the absolute Transcendence and Self-sufficiency of God. It is allergic for this reason to the word "Son" as a description of Jesus' relationship to God. One has a son only when one needs to have one, thinks the Qur'an. To be in need of a son is no compliment for a Self-sufficient God. "It befitteth not (the Majesty of) Allah that He should take unto himself a son. Glory be to Him! When he decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is" (19:35). God needs no partner nor helper. He is not dependent on any of His creatures. "Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender." (4:171) A sense of desperate indignation gives itself vent that the Qur'an cannot rest from polemising against the so-called sons and daughters of God, first at home in Mecca and then in Medina where it came into immediate contact with the Jews as a closed community, and with Christians at least as a religious front. It finds the "election-complex" of these two communities full of irony. "The Jews and Christians say: We are sons of Allah and His loved ones. Say: Why then doeth He chastise you for your sins. Nay, ye are but mortals of His creating..." (5:18). There seems to have been some confusion with the expression "son of God". Apparently Jesus was not the only one to be called so. "And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of Allah, and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah. That is their saying with their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved of old. Allah (Himself) fighteth against them. How perverse are they!" (9:30) (Pickthall's translation, Allah fighteth against them, is not exact. What

is expressed here is a heavy curse: God damn these people!) The perversion spoken of here is of a theological nature. It is going astray from the straight path of the belief in the One God. The Qur'an sees no difference between the disbelieving peoples of old on whom God's punishment fell, and the People of the Scripture of the present day, who "exaggerate" in their religion (cf. 5:77). The following verse conveys the impression that it does not distinguish between worship of the One God, homage to Jesus, cult of saints, and perhaps respect and honour for religious leaders: "They have taken as lord beside Allah their rabbis and their monks and the Messiah son of Mary, when they were forbidden to worship only One God. There is no god save Him. Be He glorified from all that they ascribe as partner (unto Him)!" (9:31)

To close this survey of the Qur'anic picture of Jesus with references from the 9th Sura, held to be chronologically the last, should frustrate any hope of building a bridge between the existing Christian dogma and the Qur'anic Christology. What the Qur'an last said on a subject is considered its last word on it. In no two verses is the rejection of the Christian teaching on Jesus so uncompromising as in 9:30-1; it seals its judgement with an attendant curse.

It may be illusory to suppose that the awareness of a totally different Christology in the Qur'an would move the Christians to reopen the discussion on Jesus' relationship to God. They consider it an officially closed chapter. In recent times, however, there have been signs of an openness to look at the Qur'anic Christology seriously. Three names deserve special mention: Schedl, Raisanen, and Luling. They depart from the traditional Christian scholarship which conveniently explained the difference of the Qur'anic Christology from the official Christian teaching as Muhammad's ignorance, or worse, his will to vicious distortion (see Rudolf, 88; Raisanen: *The Portrait*, 122f.) Schedl finds in Qur'an's emphasis on Jesus as the Servant of God reason enough to suggest that in it an early Christology traceable to some passages in the Acts of the

Apostles in which Jesus is called God's Servant (3:13-26; 4:27-30) has resurrected itself. The Syrian-semitic Christology is said to have gone its own way, independent of the Councils. Raisanen, a Biblical scholar, finds astounding parallels between some New Testament passages on Jesus and those in the Qur'an. The NT offers not only one Christology but many. Luling, who in his book *uber den Ur-Qu'ran* (Erlangen, 1974) claims to have discovered in some of the early suras of the Qur'an Christian hymns, presents Muhammad (in *Wiederentdeckung*) as the defender of a genuinely early Jewish-Christian Angel-Christology against a hellenistic "mystery cult" Christology, which divinises Jesus. He finds the potential for his intuitive thesis in the title of Jesus in the Qur'an *muqarrab*, one brought near to God, like the angels.

Illusory again is it to think that the breakthrough achieved by these few scholars will revolutionize Christian-Muslim relations in the near future. If at all, it involves the painstaking task of wading through to the original times and sources, and a readiness to de-dogmatize.

Mathew Paraplackal

## **The Prophets' Zeal as well as their Seal**

The careful reader of the Qur'an becomes aware from time to time of echoes of the New Testament. One of them is the idea of the 'sealing' of the book (cf. Isaiah 29:11; Rev. 22:10) or its being left unsealed. To this we will return. Another is the 'feel' in Surah 2:87 of the situation in the parable of the vineyard and the husbandmen which comes in all three Synoptic Gospels. Of the succession of messengers, Surah 2:87 says: '...some you said were liars and some you put to death'. The Qur'an elsewhere — indeed everywhere — is alert to this dimension of human obduracy and rejection as the likely reward of faithful messengers as they come, in their sequence, to the tribes and peoples and scenes of their vocation. They all summon in the Name of God and on His behalf. But they are all liable to find themselves hazardously poised on the receiving end of mankind's ill-will against God.

This high degree of prophetic participation — as we must say — in what God's own summons suffers in and from humanity is of vital importance to any understanding of prophethood. To be sent with divine demands on human submission is to incur in one's own person the pain and peril of demands refused, scorned, decried, and repudiated. Even the most cursory perusal of the Qur'an must be impressed with this realistic view of history, this dark sense of history's chronic unreadiness for the claim and rule of God. Noah, Abraham, Hud, Salih, Shu'aib, Moses and all the other figures in the Quranic context of 'messengership' knew this destiny of long-suffering, this commission to hold out and bear up under adversity — an adversity only incurred on God's

behalf, a tribulation they could readily escape by abandoning the mission and silencing the word. That option they do not take despite the blandishments or threats from their constituency, the temptation to deny their mandate and turn back to the tradition of 'their fathers' and cease to be disturbers of the *status quo*.

This capacity to be resolute is no small part of the zeal of prophethood. Being so, it follows that a significant part of the fulfilment of prophethood passes into the quality of the personality. It cannot, and does not, belong only with words said, except perhaps in the earliest and barest forms of the prophetic. Inevitably it passes into the fabric of biography: it is expressed — because of words to be uttered — in fidelities of character and situation which are actually lived before the eyes of men. Surely it is, in part, for this reason that the Qur'an repeatedly insists that messengers are recruited from the ranks of the people they address. Muhammad himself was *ummi*, from among the *ummiyyun*, that is, a man of the people thus far without Scriptures of their own, a citizen of that *urum al-qura* (i.e., Mecca) to which his mission was sent (Surah 42.7). It was 'their brother, Shu'aib, who was commissioned to warn Madyan. Muhammad stresses to his hearers that he has lived a lifetime among them.

When Muslims and Christians try to talk patiently together about the implications for the other of what each believes may not the latter's faith in Jesus as 'the Word made flesh' be illuminated by this dimension of 'life-significance' within prophethood where-ever we find the sending of a messenger — or, almost everywhere? It is true that the greatest prophets of the Biblical tradition, from Amos to Jeremiah and beyond, find no representation within the Qur'an. And their absence — for reasons we might ponder — is significant. But it does not affect the central point we are making: that being is inseparable from saying and that life is implicit where speech is explicit. The Prophet tells and warns and guides by how he is as well as by what he declares — how he is, in fact, in relation to the reception of what he speaks.

This is eminently so in the Islamic Qur'an. For it enters into its very structure. The early deliverances of Muhammad are greeted with the scepticism and resistance of the Quraish. These attitudes of ridicule and hostility deepen as the encounter develops and as the rulers and people of Mecca suspect that the new message, with the call to abandon the idols, poses a vital threat to the prestige of the shrine, the Ka'bah and to the commerce which pilgrimage fostered. Other factors—apathy, tradition, pride — play their part. Vested interests, social, tribal, psychic and religious, are at stake. So the people resist, accuse and denigrate. Thus there comes into the Qur'an the temper and language of controversy: 'They are saying... Say thou...' To numerous charges — that he is a poet, mad, taught for aliens, a power-seeker—he is directed to respond and the response is within the very texture of the sacred text. 'Holy writ' we might say, has to hinge on actual situations. Hence the *asbab al-nuzul*, as exegesis calls them, the 'occasions of revelation' without knowledge of which commentary cannot well proceed.

Thus the Qur'an is situational through and through. One can plot the sequence of the *Sirah*, or life-course, of the messenger on the very content of the message, before and after the crucial *Hijrah*, or emigration, which assigns the Qur'an as a whole to either Mecca or Medina, because the locale is vital to the content. We can no more have revelation as words into a vacuum than we can speak about the noise of colour or of a stationary river. Inescapably the situations in which Muhammad is, the manner of his response to them, the implications they carry for the logic of the spoken words, belong critically to the things said.

Conversation between us in the two faiths can reflect on this fact without necessarily raising the difficult issue (difficult conceptually for Muslims as well as difficult in itself) of how far Muhammad's own inner reactions related to what he was directed to say. That issue about *wahy* is a sensitive one for Muslim faithful. The desire to have the Qur'an wholly and incontestably 'miraculous, from God by mysterious enabling of an illiterate, runs deep in the soul

of Islam and must be respected, even though words like 'We have sent it down upon your heart' (Surah 2. 97, 26. 194) —not simply 'upon your lips'—would seem to argue a full personal involvement. But be this as it may (and the mystery of 'inspiration' is a mystery in all great prophethood, the hence and hither of the word), it does not affect the truth that any and every inspired truth is, to a degree, 'biographicised'.

These thoughts may well be a helpful area and sound one from which to approach the Christian faith about Jesus as 'the incarnate Word'. The term 'prophet' belongs honourably to the Gospel tradition. 'This is Jesus, the prophet of Nazareth' was how the Galileans accompanying Jesus on the great entry to Jerusalem explained to the citizens the identity of their Master. 'That a great prophet is risen up among us' was how Jesus' works of compassion were described (Matt. 21:11 and Luke 7:16). 'Jesus came teaching and preaching' is how the Gospels herald the whole story. That he was 'Jeremiah or one of the prophets' was how people, according to the report of the disciples, identified him in response to: 'Whom do men say that I am' ? (Matt. 16:13)

Certainly, in his teaching and preaching, Jesus — sometimes, as it seemed, mysteriously — associated his person closely with his message 'Come unto Me' he said. He used the term 'Son of Man' with overtones that have long engaged the studies of scholars. But what was to become in the apostolic faith, the Gospel about Jesus is inexplicable apart from the Gospel of Jesus, the Gospel, that is which Jesus uttered. Christians can readily go along with the Quranic belief which finds Jesus 'a prophet' even though they believe much larger things concerning him and disallow the notion that he was only 'penultimate' to another or that, in promising the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, he was adumbrating, as Muslims think, the advent of Muhammad.

Jesus as 'a prophet' is, then, integral to Jesus 'Son of God most high'. And everything in the Gospels is strongly 'situational'. That is why there had to be gospel

in the first place and not just a dossier of sermons. It was a personality from whom the literature derived, and a personality whom the literature portrayed. But all that happened as 'event' had to do with what was uttered. Jesus would not have suffered as he did if he had not taught as he did. But suffering as he did, he did not cease to teach. On the contrary: but the teaching passed into 'words from the Cross', into the impact of character on event, in the disclosure of character by event. We can never dissociate the words of Jesus from his being 'the Word of God' 'the Word made flesh' and 'dwelling among us'. That 'dwelling', in John's vocabulary (1:14) means 'spreading a tent among us', in analogy with the tent in the wilderness, the tent of the 'Presence', the *Sakinah* in Qur'an's term. It is the apostles' way of saying that there the very self-expression of God is 'biographified' in the Jesus of the Gospel story—a story of which speaking is a part but a part that passes into a larger whole and is the occasion, the locale, of what is 'more than prophethood'. If John the herald could be described as 'more than a prophet' (Matt. 11:9), could it be less true of Jesus himself that he was 'more than a prophet'?

In Quranic and Islamic understanding there is nothing 'more' than prophethood in God's dealings with mankind in tuition, exhortation, warning and guidance. One prophet may be 'more' than another, Abraham superior to Hud, or Moses to Salih, 'more' in respect of range of audience or historical repute. But 'more' than a prophet? No! unless we distinguish (as Muslims do) between *rusul*, or 'apostles' (four in all?) and *anbiya'* in a (technically) lesser rank. But all are messengers, all are in 'sentness' with words and mandates to warn and to bring good news of God.

But 'more', categorically 'more' in the meaning of the Incarnation is how Christianity understands and confesses the total significance of 'the prophet of Nazareth'. In him 'the Word is made flesh'. Instead of being simply — as we have seen — a concomitant of all prophethood — the 'situational' reality becomes the very nature of the divine

disclosure. We have 'truth through personality' as its very vehicle, its ground and core, rather than simply personality engaged in vocal truth.

In thinking through our doctrinal relationships in this way between mosque and church, it is important to remember how the historic faith in the Incarnation arose, and was defined, (as they say in Latin) *ex eventu*. It was the human, the experience, the down-to-earth ministry which came first. The disciples were recruited by, and to, Jesus without knowledge of his real identity. In following a Rabbi, a Master, they discovered, beyond the Cross and Resurrection, 'the Christ of God'. It could only be that way. Matthew and Luke could preface their Gospels with the story of the Virgin Birth only because they knew the sequel which only the teaching, life and death of Jesus had imparted. The definition came after the realisation, after the occasions and the total situation. There is no evidence whatever that when 'Jesus came preaching' from Galilee men said: 'This is he whom the Virgin bore and whom Magi came to worship', or made these the ground of the hearing they gave him. That hearing turned solely on the things he taught and his quality in teaching them. Similarly, when the faith of the Church in his identity was offered to the world in the apostolic journeys, its appeal and its warrant lay, not in the manner of His birth but in the mystery of his life and death. It was because of who he had proved to be that they found their faith imaged in how he came to birth as the one whose significance, received and loved, meant 'newness of life' for those 'born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh', but 'of God.' (John 1:12)

This *post factum* nature of the historic faith about Jesus could only come that way. It was consequent upon the experience which conveyed the truth of it. But that experience had only been what it was for the disciples, because it had derived from what had been present from the start. Men had God *in* and because of Jesus only because they had Jesus *from* and because of God. The 'Father'-*'Son'* relationship, and analogy, interdependent in the faith of the

Christian. 'Fatherhood' is disclosed in this 'Sonship'; this 'Sonship' discloses the 'Fatherhood'. God's was the initiative and God's the achievement. 'The Father sent the Son' Clearly, when the Gospels employ the theme of 'being sent' this way they mean something other than that 'being' in solely human terms of what the Qur'an understands and affirms about *risalah* and *rasuliyyah* — the Arabic terms about the 'sending' and the 'sent'.

This study, between us, in comparable terms and distinctive meanings bears importantly on the theme of 'sealing' which we used in the title at the start. Muhammad is loved and revered in Islam as *Khatm al-nubuwwah*, 'the seal of prophecy'. In him, it is held, revelation is finalised. The long sequence ends in that which enshrines and perfects all else preceding it. As such it needs, and can have no later emendation, addition, or substitution. Truth is ours *in toto*, unchangeably ultimate. In places, Biblically, the notion of 'sealing the book' concerned either a future relevance for which it must be securely preserved, or a present and continual security from addition or subtraction.

Such 'finalising' of the truth of Islam, in the Qur'an as a textual volume, incurs the issue present for all religious belief within historical time, namely the issue of development, of the relation of the unchanging, and unchangeable, to the flux of temporal existence. Organs like *Hadith* (tradition); *Ijma'* (consensus) in Islam serve to 'develop' what is Quranic but only on the principle of non-repugnance to it. The criterion *Al-Furqan* — one of the Qur'an's titles) must remain inviolate and sacrosanct.

Questions multiply for all of us in this area of faith. For time cannot be captured in the static, nor can language be ensured against changing usage. 'Everything passes', as the Qur'an has it 'except His (God's) countenance' (Surah 28:88, cf. 55:26); and this, to a degree must concern scriptures themselves. The Christian Scriptures have a different *raison d'être* and rationale from that of the Qur'an. They are derivative from the prior,

fact of the Christ and, as written words, give access to the living Word. Their origin and nature, their making and interpretation, proceed upon a totally different scriptural category from that of the Qur'an for Muslims. Some Christians, it is true have misguidedly sought to endow them with a Qur'an-style textual 'divineness'. This, however, is a stance which can only be sustained by abandoning the whole meaning of 'the Word made flesh', which we have earlier pondered.

It is important that this difference should be clearly in mind when we talk with each other. For it is highly relevant to the question of finality. Let us not strive after crude or self-commending comparison here. But, for Christians, finality lies 'in Christ' rather than in the texts about him. If we have 'truth through personality', if we have God 'manifest in flesh' then it is he who must 'lead us into all truth'. What is 'incarnate' is differently 'sealed' from what is 'textualised' as Muslims understand the Qur'an verbally to be. Of course, the Christian Scriptures, in their capacity of portraying and presenting 'the Word that dwelt among us', and in educating those who 'received him', will always be vital. The fact of the 'Canon' of Scripture is proof of that. They will never be dispensable, nor obsolete. They are as crucial, in their own form, as the Qur'an is to Muslims. But, as Jesus is reported by John as saying: 'These are they which testify of me' (John 5.39). Continuing witness likewise, down the centuries, is always of one we have known within and beyond the text we have cited, the documentary summation we have received.

There is undoubtedly something of this same dimension in Muslim's love to the person of Muhammad (see Annemarie Schimmel's erudite: *And Muhammad is His Messenger, The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, Chapel Hill, U. S. A. 1985). It also informs the sanctity of tradition. This feature of Islamic devotion can perhaps be seen as an indirect clue to what Christians, distinctively both as to doctrine and as to experience

mean by the Sonship and the divinity of Jesus. Only the focus is radically contrasted. For the supreme measure of 'the Word made flesh' is 'the love of the Cross'. This brings us to our last reflection, the one suggested in the other part of our title. What of the 'zeal' of prophethood?

It is natural and proper that prophets should yearn to succeed. But what constitutes 'success'? How can a soul be burdened with divine commission and not make his own the task of its fulfilment? How can one be entrusted with what is divine and not pursue its vindication among the human to whatever length the human will entail? Yet as we have seen from Surah 2:87 and indeed everything else in the Qur'an, as well as from Jesus' parable of the vineyard (himself echoing Isaiah) the way of the prophet is hard. Mankind is wayward, wilful, hard-hearted, unminded to heed. There is no more eloquent testimony to this than the Qur'an itself with its insistent cry: 'Most of them lack all comprehension' and its vista of the ruins of ancient tribes overtaken by divine requital of their unbelief,

Thus any 'zeal' on the part of the prophets, on behalf of God, will meet hostility, enmity, dissuasion, persecution, *fitnah* as the Qur'an calls it, *zann*, surmise and suspicion, *zulm*, manifest evil. How, then, is victory to be won? Wherein is it to be seen to be won (a question no less important)? What does prophethood do about its own hazards?

It is clear that there is a vital, and irreducible difference between Christian faith and Islamic faith in respect of the answer to those questions. The way of Muhammad was that of *Hijrah* from within a situation of verbal non-success and desperate pain, into a prospect—and an attainment—of power *via* force, of politicisation and armed encounter. Mecca which resisted his preaching came to concede his mastery. The word in the end prevailed by defeating the obduracy it had failed to persuade. Some would hold that this was inevitable in the situation, valid as a realist achievement, and authentic under God. Islam

has always strenuously upheld that conviction, in the dating of its calendar, its heritage of Caliphate, and its practice of *dhimmi* status requiring political submission of tolerated other religions as the condition of their 'religious' existence. Islam alone must properly hold the power reins. It may not duly and authentically exist in the non-powered 'religious' terms it assigns to others. Much can happen to Muslim self-interrogation when, as in contemporary India, this pattern ceases and existence 'just as a religion' is required of Muslims also. But that is another question.

What of Christ's 'success'? 'The zeal of thy house has consumed me', Jesus said (John 2:17). How prophetically true were the words — words borrowed from a prophet's mouth, and finally fulfilled in a prophet's Gethsemane, the travail of 'the prophet of Nazareth in Galilee'. Jesus undertook the obduracy of the world in the redeeming acceptance of what it willed to do to him in suffering and death. And his vindication was the Resurrection. He was a zeal, and 'obedience' (to use a word beloved in the New Testament), a self-offering in love, which passed beyond those martial victories which always buy their success by 'remainders' of evil they fail to defeat. The Cross saves only by shaping and enlisting redeemers who, in turn, avail by its meaning to 'bear the sin of the world' in their own situations, those who, 'not being overcome by evil', are enabled 'to overcome evil with good'. Such vicarious living may happen outside Christian allegiance, as Gandhi, for example, demonstrated. But the Cross of Christ will always be its paradigm — a paradigm which Christianity has been confident enough to find — because of Jesus — in God himself. That conviction will always be the most precious and, in our trust of it the most precarious transaction in our 'dialogue' with those whose 'zeal' is otherwise.

## Muhammad as Liberator

Why liberation and from what? are important questions to be answered before we get on to write about Muhammad, the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his liberation movement.

For any liberation movement the existing situation, social, political, religious, cultural or economic, is extremely important. Any liberation movement actually takes off from this situation. It is, therefore, necessary to take stock of the socio-cultural and politico-economic situation existing before Prophet Muhammad appears on the social scene of Mecca. Then and only then can we understand the significance of Muhammad as liberator.

First, let us take the social scene on the eve of the Prophet's appearance on the social scene of Mecca. Illiteracy was widespread. It is thought by the noted historian Tabari and others that there were hardly 17 persons who were literate at the time. The Arabs, in fact, considered it a waste of time to learn to read and write and even took pride in their being 'illiterate'. They were extremely fond of poetry which was something to be recited and heard, not written. No other genre had developed except poetry in Arabic literature of the time. It was said of Arabic language that it was sacred to the ears, not to the eyes. Written prose was almost unknown, Arabic was merely a spoken language.

It was not for nothing that the period before Islam was called a period of *jahilliyah* (i.e., ignorance). It was not mere illiteracy which mattered most. The social outlook was very narrow. In fact they hardly ever

saw beyond their own tribe. Their code of conduct too was limited to unwritten tribal customs. There were no written laws. The Arabs at the time took great pride in their ancestry. If their tribal pride was hurt it would result in prolonged bloodshed, at times lasting over generations.

The religious scene was even worse. Each tribe had its own idol. Historians tell us there were more than 360 idols in K'aba, the holy abode of God. Tribal gods brought about even sharper divisions. There was no concept of humanity beyond one's tribe. The whole existence of an Arab was circumscribed by tribal limits. Superstitions were a great religious force. These superstitions have been referred to in the Qur'an and condemned. There was no attempt whatsoever to widen the frontier of knowledge. Their whole life was governed by superstition.

The position of women was very unenviable. They were treated merely as chattel and enjoyed no rights in the tribal codes. Though there was no practice of veil like feudal society, they were socially and economically unfree. They could not play independent role in social, economic or political affairs. Their marital status was even worse. They had to live, at times, with more than a dozen co-wives. Also, they were considered a burden and in many cases an attempt was made to bury them alive to which the Quran also refers in a verse (And when the one buried alive is asked, For whatsin she was killed, 81:8-9).

The Economic scene was no less depressing. The social woes of the weaker sections were indescribable. The Tribal economic structure was collapsing and a commercial oligarchy was coming into being. This oligarchy was motivated by material greed and was blatantly disregarding even tribal obligations. As a result the orphans, the widows and the needy (*miskin*) greatly suffered. Also, there were innumerable slaves and slave girls. They were condemned to work without any reward. The slave-girls

were compelled to cohabit with their masters. The slaves existed on the periphery of the society. They had no human dignity.

Also, among the free there were many who had been completely marginalised. They were condemned to provide cheap labour. The commercial caravans passed through Mecca. The camels carrying commercial goods had to be loaded and unloaded. This cheap labour was provided by the poor and the needy, those existing on the margin of the society. Neither they could protest or unionise. Such a concept did not exist at that time. The artisans too were condemned to struggle for bare existence. They included tanners, smiths, carpenters and others. The neo-rich, on the other hand led a life of luxury.

Politically the situation was less dismal. Arabs were a fiercely independent people who jealously guarded their independence. No attempt to subjugate them ever succeeded whether at the hands of the Romans or the Sassanids. They thus lived independently in the Arabian peninsula. However, as pointed out earlier, there was no unity among the Arabs divided as they were among various tribes fiercely fighting against each other. Moreover, there was no concept of unity beyond ones own tribe. Such a unity was considered blasphemous, to say the least. Only a few tribes in Mecca tried to form inter-tribal corporations for commercial purposes. The commercial caravans were often jointly owned by individuals belonging to different tribes.

Muhammad appears on the social scene of Mecca in such despicable conditions. He had no schooling as neither literacy was encouraged (as pointed out earlier) nor had it any functional value (except for commercial contracts, a need which was newly emergent and was met with the help of a few literates in Mecca). He was orphaned at an early age, led a life of penury and was steeled through struggles of life. He married a rich widow at the age of 25 and began to lead a life of a recluse in the cave of Hira where he spent time brooding over the

social, religious, political and economic situation around him. He then literally burst over the Meccan scene at the age of 40 to liberate his people as well as the whole humanity.

Liberate from what? whom? and why?. Liberation from ignorance, superstition, oppression, slavery and injustice. Liberation to give dignity and freedom of thought and action. These are the noble ideals which not only provide inspiration to live but also encourage creativity and purposeful action. Also, Muhammad worked for the liberation of the oppressed, the poor and the needy and the ignorant. He was, in this project of liberation, not only a teacher and a philosopher, but also an activist, participant and fighter. Under his inspiration the Arabs not only liberated themselves but also sought to liberate others by shattering the two greatest oppressive empires of the world in those days, i.e., the Roman and the Sassanid. Their stormy victories were ensured as they were seen by the oppressed of these mighty empires as liberators.

## II

We would now discuss the liberative elements and liberative aspects of Muhammad the Prophet's teachings and actions.

For any liberative praxis knowledge is a must. In fact it is knowledge which provides perspective for liberation and for liberative actions. It is thus not for nothing that the very first revelation (see chapter 96 *The Clot*) came with the word *iqra'*, i.e., read. The following verses in this chapter also lay stress on acquiring 'ilm (i.e., knowledge). The verses run as follows: "Read in the name of thy Lord who creates (the implication being one should study and acquire knowledge of creation). Creates man from a clot, Read, thy Lord is most Bountiful One who has taught (man) the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know."

It is important to note here that there was no concept even of pen among the Arabs, literacy being very

rare. Here the Quran stresses the use of pen as it is through pen that knowledge is transmitted from one place to another and from one generation to the other. Thus revelation to the Prophet began with stress on knowledge and its transmission to others. Elsewhere the Quran also likens knowledge to *nur* (light) Thus Allah led the Arabs (as they were the immediate people around the Prophet then) from darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge. One can understand what liberative effect this acquisition of knowledge must have had on the minds of the Arabs. The Prophet further reinforced this by his making acquisition of knowledge obligatory (*faridat*) for both men and women. The Prophet also induced his followers to acquire knowledge even if it be in China (Şin).

Undoubtedly these exhortations by the holy Quran and the Prophet had great liberative effect on the Arabs and his other followers. The Arabs who had nothing but abhorrence for knowledge became masters of learning within a century. During the Abbasid period the Arabs and other Muslims acquired the entire treasure of Greek knowledge so much so that they were referred to as its foster fathers. Not only this they produced great philosophers like Avicena and Avveroes and several other philosophers, masters of medicine, chemists, geographers, physicists and mathematicians to whom even the West is indebted. The Muslims could have hardly achieved this excellence in knowledge but for the exhortations of the Quran and the Prophet. The Arabs thus were completely liberated from ignorance.

### **Social liberation**

Liberation from ignorance had deeper consequences in other areas. The Arabs, as pointed out earlier, were greatly constrained by tribal outlook. This outlook was completely shattered by the Quranic teaching that entire humankind has originated from the same man and woman and no one has any distinction over the other on the basis of tribe, nation, race or colour. These divisions only serve the purpose of identification. The most honoured is one

who is most just and most pious. The Quranic verse runs thus, "O humankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might recognise one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is one who is most righteous (and just).

This was a most revolutionary concept not only for the Arabs but for entire human race. The barriers of colour and race are powerful even today so much so that the UNO had to stress equality of all irrespective of caste, creed and colour in its charter of human rights which is considered most liberative, and rightly so. But the Quranic charter anticipated this by several centuries. The Prophet demonstrated this by elevating an emancipated negro slave Bilal to the status of his *muazzin* (i. e., caller to the prayer), an honour coveted by many free men among the Arabs. It is after him that some black Muslims in the States have formed a Bilalian society. By elevating a freed negro slave to this status the Prophet clearly demonstrated human dignity is above all colour as well as social status. There can't be a more liberative act than this.

The Prophet also fought against superstitions and supernatural beliefs. He refused to perform any miracle. He projected himself, not as a supernatural being but as a human being like anyone else. The Quran was very categorical about it. The Quran ridicules any demand for miracles. In chapter 17 there are several verses to this effect (see verses from 90 to 95). The unbelievers demanded miracles like causing a spring to gush forth from the earth; or to create a garden of palms and grapes among which rivers should flow forth abundantly; or cause heaven to come down upon us in pieces; or bring Allah and the angels face to face or you create for yourself a house of gold; or yourself ascend into heaven and so on. Allah wants people to accept the guidance as it comes to them through the Prophet. Had there been angels living on earth an Angel would have been sent down to give them guidance. Among human beings only a human

being would be sent as prophet. Thus the Quran rejected the demand of unbelievers to perform miracles. The only miracle was the Quran itself.

The Quran's style was simple, fluent and powerful. It was the first example of a powerful and purposeful prose. Its diction was urban and classical. Its style and power simply astounded the Arabs who were so proud of their inimitable style and diction. They could not rival its style despite repeated challenge. Still they continued to deny the truth of its message.

A revolutionary, radical and liberative movement stresses reason as reason teaches one to question and critically examine. The Qur'an revealed to Muhammad lays stress on reason, not on mystery or miracles. The Quran repeatedly calls upon the people to think, and addresses them as *u'l'il albab* which means people of reason. *Lubb* in Arabic means an essence of a thing and reason is considered as essence of humanity and thus by inference *lubb* is used for reason; its plural being *albab*.

Also, those who follow ancestral tradition and do not change are called *a'ama* (blind) and those who think as *basir* (i.e., one who can see). It goes on to say, "Say (O Muhammad): I say not to you, I have with me the treasures of Allah, nor do I know the unseen, nor do I say to you that I am an angel; I follow only that which is revealed to me. Say: Are the blind and the seeing alike? Do you not then reflect." (6:50)

In this verse once again Muhammad is asked to deny all supernatural powers and preference is given to one who sees and reflects. Thus appeal is to reason, not to tradition. In another verse the Quran says, "Does one of you like to have a garden of palms and vines with streams flowing in it — he has therein all kinds of fruits — and old age has overtaken him and he has weak offspring; when (lo!) a whirlwind with fire in it smites it so it becomes blasted. Thus Allah makes the signs clear to you that you may think." (2:266)

Here a very earthly example has been given which is often experienced and there is nothing supernatural or superstitious about it and then the Quran invites us to think and reflect on it. Nowhere does the Quran require us to accept anything blindly. Signs are made clear and then we are urged to think over it. Islam was a revolutionary movement which wanted to liberate people from shackles of tradition and irrational conventions perpetrated through the ages. Hence it invites its addressees again and again to reflect and think, not to follow blindly. It had great liberative effect on thousands of the Prophet's followers.

Muhammad was basically engaged in liberating the weaker sections of the society, both those who were sexually weaker and economically weaker. Women, as pointed out earlier, suffered great disabilities in Arabia in particular, and in the whole world in general. Muhammad, announced through the Quran a charter of rights for women. Quran for the first time gave them rights, never conceded them before in any legal code. Woman's individual existence as a legal entity was accepted without any qualification for the first time. As far as the Quran was concerned she could contract marriage (without any marriage guardian), could divorce her husband without any condition, inherit from her father, mother and other relatives, could own property in her own absolute right (neither her father nor her brother or husband could tamper with it or deprive her of it), could have custody of her children (upto certain age after which children would exercise their option) and could take her own free decisions.

It is also laid down in the Quran that her male relatives cannot coerce her in anyway even in matters of marriage. No legal charter before Islam gave these rights to women. In Europe women could not even own property in their own right even upto late nineteenth century. In fact the Quran announced in clear words that in her rights and obligations she is equal to man (see

The Quran 2:228). It was nothing short of revolution for her. For the first time in history she was given a legal status equal to that of man and she was liberated from the clutches of male domination.

The only stigma she can be said to have suffered was permission given to man to marry more than one wife (up to four). This no doubt detracts from her status of equality with man. However, one has to take a historical view of the matter. The Arabs married any number of wives; Islam restricted it to four. Earlier multiple marriages were just for the sake of pleasure and without any reason. Islam put strict conditions. The marriages were not to be allowed just for pleasure. It was permitted strictly in case of orphans and widows, to take care of such unprotected women. Both the Quranic verses on polygamy are with reference to the orphans and widows and their properties. Also, the Quran lays down a strict condition of equal treatment in all matters including the matter of love. Thus the Quran says, "And if you fear that you cannot do justice to orphans, marry such women as seem good to you, two, or three, or four, *but if you fear that you will not do justice, then (marry) only one or that which your right hands possess.*" (4:3)

Thus it would be seen that it is not a general license to marry more than one wife for pleasure. Also, it was a historical necessity. It is no more necessary. As it militates against more cardinal principle of justice, it would be nothing un-Islamic to either ban it or severely restrict it and permit it only in exceptional cases. Many Islamic countries have done it. Also, there is no concept of *Purdah* (veil) in Quran. Quran had only prescribed pulling down a bit the head gear in order to discriminate free women from slave-girls as unbelievers used to tease Muslim women and when caught used to get away by saying "we thought she was a slave-girl". The Quran nowhere requires women to cover their faces or hide themselves.

These mild disabilities on women should also be seen in sociological and not theological context. If the society, or sociological context changes these disabilities should no more be imposed. It is important to note that the Quran first accepts the concept of freedom and individual dignity of women and then, in view of the historical and sociological context, proceeds to impose these mild disabilities referred to above. Basic principle of freedom and individual dignity is more important than the sociological disabilities. The earlier concept would have precedence over the latter as it is fundamental, not contingent.

### **Economic justice**

The Quran lays great emphasis on distributive justice. It is totally against accumulation and hoarding of wealth. It condemns accumulated wealth as strongly as possible. It also exhorts the people to take care of orphans, widows, the needy and the poor.

It does not want wealth to circulate only among the rich (59:7). Also it warns the people that wealth should not be counted again and again nor should one think it can give eternal life. One who accumulates and counts again and again will certainly be hurled into crushing disaster and what is this crushing disaster? It is hell fire, which rises over the heart (see chapter 104). Again in chapter 9, verse 34 it gives severe warning to those who accumulate wealth and do not spend it in the way of Allah. The Quran also exhorts the believers to spend whatever is surplus (after fulfilling basic needs) (2:219).

The practice of usury in Mecca was back-breaking and a great many people were in the debt-trap. The Quran strongly denounced usury and warned those who perpetrate it to be prepared for a war with Allah and His Messenger (see verses 275 to 278 in chapter 2 and verse 39 of chapter 30). Many scholars strongly feel that

*riba* means not only usury but exploitation in general and also includes exploitative profit.

The Prophet also disapproved of share-cropping (*mukhabira, muhaqila*) which again is an exploitative practice. He also banned speculation in every form to prevent exploitation of the poor at the hands of the rich and powerful. For example, he banned buying of un-ripened standing crop as it often results in exploitation of the needy peasant. He approved of only legitimate margin of profit (as a reward for one's work and entrepreneurship) and strongly disapproves of hoarding, black-marketing etc. He not only permits the hungry to snatch food from one who has excess of it but also declares him a martyr if he dies in the process of procuring it.

Also, the Quran strongly denounces *zulm* (injustice, oppression) and permits the oppressed to fight against oppression. It says, "And what reason have you not to fight in the way of Allah, and of the weak among the men and the women and the children who say: Our Lord, take us out of this town, whose people are oppressors, and grant us from Thee a friend and grant us from Thee a helper." (4:75) Thus one who fights for the weak is the helper and friend of the Lord. The Quran not only induces believers to fight for the weak and the oppressed, but promises that the oppressed would lead and inherit this earth (28:5).

Thus it would be seen that the Quran is a charter of liberation for the oppressed, Islam exercises its option for the poor and the oppressed and has no kind words for *mutrifun* (i.e., those live in luxury). When we wish to destroy a town, the Quran says, we induce its rich to transgress all limits and we destroy that town with utter destruction (17:16). Thus it is clear that when the rich become insensitive to the sufferings of the poor and needy the whole social structure becomes topsy-turvy and is ultimately destroyed at the hands of the revolution.

### Attitude towards other religions

Openness, tolerance and respect for other religions are another important liberative element. The Quran makes it clear there is no compulsion in religion (2:256) and that 'for you is your religion, for me is my religion' (109:6). Quran also exhorts Muslims not to abuse those who call upon besides Allah lest they abuse Allah through ignorance (6:119). Also, Quran teaches that a believer should show equal respect to all the prophets (They all believe in Allah and his angels and His books and His messengers. We make no distinction between any of his messengers 2:285). Only unbelievers make such distinctions (4:150-51).

That is why a Muslim shows equal respect to all the Prophets right upto Muhammad whether named or not named in the Quran. The Quran also declares unequivocally that paradise is not the monopoly of any religious group. Whosoever submits himself entirely to Allah and is doer of good (muhsin), he has his reward from his Lord (2:112).

Thus the Quran did not condemn any religion as false but stressed that the priests have corrupted the teachings for their own interest. All the prophets had brought Allah's message. Quran never preached disrespect, let alone hatred or violence against any religion.

However, within three decades after the death of the Prophet, Islam lost its liberative and democratic character and became part of monarchical establishment under the *Umayyads*. The Prophet had gathered the poor, the oppressed and the slaves around him and never hesitated to suffer along with them. Now the Umayyad emperors gathered powerful tyrants and oppressors around them and ruthlessly suppressed all those who challenged their oppressive rule. The number of slaves multiplied, women were subjugated and confined to *harems*, female slaves sexually abused, non-Arabs discriminated against, and the liberative teachings of Islam replaced by a fatalistic

outlook. Dogma of *jabr* (determinism, fatalism) was actively propagated and that of *qadr* (freedom to act) was suppressed. After the development of monarchy feudal values became supreme. Power hierarchy developed, socio-political equality was lost and equality confined only to the lines of prayers in the mosque; women came to be completely subjugated and their social status was very much eroded and Arab domination established firmly.

It was steep decline down the hill and Islam lost all its liberative thrust (except in dissident movements and rebellions and could never recapture its earlier spirit when Muhammad (peace be upon him) preached and practised.

Asghar Ali Engineer

## Women in Islam : Spirit and Progress

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights and the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (General Assembly Resolution, adopted on 7th November, 1967) condemned, at the highest level of the World Forum, the past, traditional *status quo* of women, and stated the need for its thorough transformation. After laudable rethinking of past attitudes on the subject, it recommends a re-evaluation of established norms, and deplores, in its very first article discrimination against women as an offence against human dignity. Women's right to participate in the social, economic, educational, cultural and political fields of endeavour was granted equal recognition with the right of men. Hence the equal right for women and men to acquire, administer, dispose of, and inherit property, and to legal exercise thereof; equal freedom to choose or refuse a spouse, to consent or not to enter into marital status; equal rights for women and men during the subsistence of a marriage as well as during its dissolution. The Declaration bars child marriage; it grants the right to equal conditions in the matter of education, of free choice of revised vocational training, of employment, of remuneration and of treatment in respect of work of equal value.

The above resolution was found necessary in spite of the United Nations Declaration of Fundamental Human Rights in order to ensure the dignity and worth of the human person, and the rights of women who have for

centuries been geared, if I may use the expression, into *second class roles* in a generally patriarchal society. In this light I would like to review the role Islam has played in the lives of women. A detailed analysis of the historical perspective on women's position from the inception of Islam to the present times is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless it will try to examine at some length the Quranic vision and the Prophet's instruction regarding women. It seems to me that a dichotomy exists between the instruction and its spirit on the one hand and the present understanding and practice on the other. The wide gulf which separates them is due to cultural and economic factors, and a generally accepted patriarchal view of society.

The recognition the Quran grants to women's material and spiritual conditions seem to be the same as those granted to men. "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves in prayer, for men and women who give charity, for men and women who guard their chastity is forgiveness and a great reward (H. Q. 33:35). "Never will I suffer to lose the work of any of you, be he male or female: you are members one of the other." (H. Q. 3:195) The rewards of paradise are equivalent for both, according to the course of their actions. "He that works evil will not be requited but by the like thereof: and he that works righteous deeds, whether a man or a woman, and is a believer, such shall enter the Garden of Bliss..." (H. Q. 40:40) Revelation which is God's greatest gift is granted to both men and women. "Behold the Angel said, 'O Mary, God has chosen thee and purified thee and chosen thee above the women of all nations.'" (H. Q. 3:42) "So we sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses: 'Suckle thy child but when thou hast fears about him, cast him in the river, but fear not nor grieve for we shall restore him to thee and we shall make him one of our apostles.'" (H. Q. 28:7)

From a financial point of view women enjoy the same benefits as men, and they may, if they so feel, follow any respectable profession as men. "To men is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn." (H. Q. 4:32) Women can inherit property as men can. "From what is left by parents and those near related there is a share for men and a share for women." (H.Q. 4:7)

Similarly the condition of marriage does not in any way undermine a woman's right as an individual member of society. She is still free to carry on any work she likes, to make any contract she desires, to dispose of her property as she wishes. Nor is her individuality merged into that of her husband. "And women shall have rights similar to those against them according to what is equitable." (H.Q. 2:228).

A cordial relationship between husband and wife is strongly recommended. "And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them and He has put love and mercy between your hearts." (H.Q. 30:21) "It is He who created you from a single being and made his mate of like nature that he might dwell with her in love." (H.Q. 7: 189) Though the form of a Muslim marriage is contractual and non-ceremonial, marriage itself as a concept is not merely a contract. The sacredness of its character can be seen from: "And they have taken from you a solemn covenant" (H.Q. 4:2). The notion that woman was derived from the ribs of Adam is alien to Islam, for the Quran says: "O Mankind, reverence your Guardian-Lord who created you from a single person and created his mate of like nature." (H.Q. 4:1) Here a 'single person' does not specify a gender.)

Women's participation in various activities, as *Hadith* or the Traditions of Prophet Muhammad points out was never discouraged. Women took part in national activities, acted as advisers, and while they were efficient managers of the household, nonetheless joined in congregational prayers in the mosque (Bu. 10:162,164). They were in the battlefield

before the Red Cross nurses, (Bu: 56:57), carried provision therein (Bu. 56:66), helped carry the wounded and slain from the battlefields (Bu. 56:68), and even participated in fighting when necessary (Bu. 56:62,63,65). The Prophet's wife Zainab prepared hides, devoting the proceeds of the sale for charitable work. Women helped as labourers in the fields when necessary (Bu. 67:108), served male guests at a feast (Bu. 67:78), carried on business (Bu. 11:40). The great lady Khadija herself had a well established business. They could sell and purchase from men and men could sell and purchase from them (Bu. 34:67).

Legally, their status was no different as Islam fosters an approach of fairness and justice. Men being the physically stronger sex are asked to financially maintain their spouses and though a woman may be wealthy, no reciprocity to maintain the husband is mentioned. "Let the man of means spend according to his means and the man whose resources are restricted, let him spend according to what God has given him." (H.Q 67:6) The wife also must mutually co-operate. Though she is not bound to personal services as cooking meals, or nursing children or helping him in his various endeavours, yet mutual regard and love often makes her do so. In Islam the husband likewise is expected to help wife in daily routine chores. Prophet Muhammad himself helped his wives in the household. He milked the goats, mended his own clothes, repaid his shoes, cleaned the utensils etc.

As noted, women's active participation in any field of activity, be it education or public life, was perfectly legitimate and there is no evidence either in the Quran or Traditions of the Prophet to prove the contrary. The pilgrimage of Haj, which men and women perform as a community, bears witness to the fact. It therefore cannot be denied that the seclusion of women is the influence of Pre-Islamic Tribal custom which crept into the social pattern of Muslims at a later stage and which has had the tendency to stagnate the advancement of Muslim Nations. The seclusion of women undoubtedly possessed many advantages in the social well-being of uncultured and unsettled primitive

communities. Seeing the wide-spread laxity of morals among all classes of people, Prophet Muhammad strongly recommended modesty in appearance and dress. But to suppose that his recommendation should assume its present rigid form that he enjoined seclusion of women is wholly opposed to the spirit of his reforms. The Quran itself affords no warrant for holding the seclusion of women as presently practised. It should be noted that the first verse of modesty of outlook is addressed to men, "Say to the *believing men* that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them." (H.Q. 24:30) Then, "And say to believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty." (H.Q. 24:31) Further recommendation to women are: "They should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof" (H.Q. 44:31) and "O Prophet, tell thy wives and daughters that they should cast their outer garments over their persons when abroad, that is most convenient that they should be known as such and not molested." (H.Q. 33: 9) Two points seem to be made in the above verses; one, if the women did not go out where lay the necessity for prescribing a distinctive dress or occasion for their harassment? Second, it seems that this particular injunction was required by special circumstances which then prevailed in Medina, where the hypocrites would molest a woman and feign innocence by suggesting that they thought that the woman was a person of ill-repute. A particular incident when the Bani Kainuka, noted for their laxity of morals, attacked a young girl who came to the bazaar to sell milk, created a serious brawl which led to a few killings (Amirali, *Spirit of Islam*, p. 75). Further, "And stay in your houses and make not a dazzling display like the former times of ignorance." (H.Q. 33:33) This is evidently an injunction against parading finery and exciting the uncontrolled passion of youth. These wise and beneficent injunctions had for their object the promotion of decency among women, the improvement of their dress and demeanour, and their protection from insult. It should be noted that the condition of women among Arabs settled

in cities and villages was degraded in the extreme. The sacrilegious war which lasted 40 years before it was finally put an end to by Prophet Muhammad was caused by an insult offered to a woman of Basus at one of the Fairs of Ukaz. Prophet Muhammad rendered a fitful custom into a permanent creed, and enjoined respect and honour for women. His directives and their true spirit seem easy to understand when viewed against the social and moral chaos from which the Prophet was endeavouring, under God's guidance, to evolve order.

The fact is that in early Islam women were in the forefront in several fields of endeavour: Ayesha, daughter of Abu Baker and wife of Prophet Muhammad, recognized for the sharpness of her intellect, personally conducted the insurrectionary movement against Ali in what is known as the Battle of Jamal (Camel). Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, often took part in discussions regarding the Caliphate (*Amirali Spirit of Islam*. P.250). Zainab, the grand-daughter of the Prophet, shielded her nephew from the Ummayyads, and brought them in their own courts to shame for their misdeeds.

In the early history of Islam, almost until the extinction of the Saracenic Empire in the East, women continued to occupy an exalted, active position as in modern society. Zubaida, wife of Haroon, plays an important role in the history of her age. Humaida, wife of Haroon, a Medianite citizen, being left for many years the sole guardian of her minor son, educated him to be one of the most distinguished jurisconsult of his age. Sakina, daughter of Husain and grand-daughter of Ali, was brilliant and discoursed with the most learned. The ladies of the Prophet's household were known for their learning and virtues. Buran, wife of khalif Mamun, Ummul Fazal, Mamun's sister, Umme-Habib, Mamun's daughter, were famous for their scholarship.

Islam evolved a progressive status for women which can be deciphered from the instances cited above though it still seems the fashion of controversialists to deny the

fact. Centuries of progressive development under favourable cultural and educational conditions have tended to place women in most western countries on a higher social level and have given birth to a code of etiquette which recognises the right of women to higher social respect. But what was their legal position even in the most advanced communities? Until very recently a woman in England possessed no right independently of her husband.

The social echelon of respect that her European sister enjoys must also be the privilege of the Muslim woman. This should not be misconstrued to mean that the immodest dress or laxity of attitude be accepted or adopted, but the courtesy and civility be shared. The cry, therefore against Islam as a system of oppression of woman would be a misguided attack. It is predominantly the social pattern developed over the centuries giving dominance to patriarchal outlooks that has led to the present condition and treatment of women.

In a nation where the birth of a daughter was considered a calamity, Prophet Muhammad gave to women a new status which upset the established order of that society. A cursory glance at the Muslim codes relating to women would perhaps bring this factor to light. As long as a woman is unmarried she remains under the parental roof and guidance. As soon as she is of age the law vests in her all the rights which belong to her as independent human being. She is entitled to a share in her parent's property though the proportion differs. The distinction is founded on the relative position of the brother and sister. A woman who is *sui juris* can not under any circumstances, be married without her express consent. On her marriage she does not lose her individuality nor does she cease to be a separate member of society.

A *meher* or ante-nuptial settlement by the husband in favour of the wife is a necessary condition, and on his failure to make a settlement, the law presumes one in accordance with a certain set rule. A Muslim marriage

is *sijjil* or contract needing no priest and requiring no ceremonial. It validates stipulations or legal conditions which either party deems necessary as fundamental for governing future relations. The contract of marriage gives a man no rights over a woman's person, beyond what the law defines, and none whatever over her goods or property. Her rights as a mother do not depend for their recognition on the idiosyncrasy of individual judges. Her earnings acquired by her own exertions cannot be wasted by her prodigal husband, nor can she be ill-treated by one who is brutal. She acts, *sui juris*, in all matters which relate to herself in her own individual rights without the intervention of her father or her husband.

A word on polygamy in Islam. Prophet Muhammad did not introduce polygamy as is conveniently believed. He found himself amidst a system common among the Arabs. The oppression of women on the social and sexual levels can be determined by the history of daughters buried alive and of women inherited as an integral part of a man's property. Prophet Muhammad restrained polygamy by insisting on *adl* (justice). A large number of influential jurists, belonging to schools presently archaic, held polygamy unlawful where circumstances requiring it did not exist. The Mutazzalite school of jurisprudence insist on love and affection within the meaning of *adl*; they went beyond the conventional definition of *adl* which was restricted only to *nafkah* (clothing, food and lodge-ment). With the progress of thought and the variously changing social and economic patterns of the world, the conditions where polygamy could be practised are now obsolete. Polygamy is being replaced by monogamy. Abnormal situations like destitution and poverty resulting from war makes its practice sometimes useful since otherwise avenues would open up for greater evil. Significantly, Prophet Muhammad at twenty four married Khadeja who was forty, adhering strictly to the ideal of monogamy in a totally polygamous society, at the time when prevailing conditions were normal and there was no war. It

was only when war situations arose and women for want of shelter and protection were driven to less noble professions, that the Prophet married another.

Another contention that a Muslim woman has no right to divorce under the laws of Islam, requires some reviewing. There is no suggestion in the holy Quran to distinguish or set apart the rights of either party to divorce, be it men or woman, for the verse of the Quran says, "If you fear a breach between them twain, appoint two arbiters, one from his family, the other from hers; if they wish for peace God will effect their reconciliation" (H. Q. 4: 35). According to this verse, in case of disputes between husband and wife, conciliators (*Hakams*) have to be appointed to effect reconciliation. These "Hakams" would then intervene and if no reconciliation is possible and the couple have decided to part, then dissolution is effected. The after effects of divorce are then decided upon and legal terms of settlement such as custody of children, payment of *mehar* and other provisions and consideration are decided.

The present procedures to divorce, however, differ greatly from the above tenets as several modes may be adopted to effect a valid repudiation. The *talaqul-bidat* or the heretical mode of divorce is particularly interesting. The alarming fact about it is that it not only puts the wife away by the triple divorce formula, but it is accepted into the Islamic jurisprudential system, in spite of the fact that it is known as heretical. It seems like yet another infiltration of tribal laws into the Islamic system and sustained mainly by the Ummayyad monarchs who "finding the checks imposed on repudiation by Prophet Muhammad interfered with the indulgence of their caprice, endeavoured to find an escape from the strictness of the law and found in the liability of jurist a loop-hole to effect their purpose" (Mohammedan Law, vol. II, Amirali, pg. 435). Neither the Quran nor the Prophet sanctioned this form of divorce. The Shia section of Muslims do not regard it as a valid form of repudiation.

Contrary to popular belief the wife can divorce with as much difficulty or ease as the husband can. The famous examples of Jamila and Bariah whose marriages were dissolved by the Prophet at their instance, inspite of the fact that the husbands of both were anxious to continue the marital tie bears testimony to this fact. The right of the wife to initiate the proceeding cannot be denied.

The predicament in which Muslim women find themselves can be thus summed up: The comparatively backward position in which she may find herself is the result of a want of culture among the community generally, rather than any special feature in the laws of her religion. As A.A.A Faizee aptly puts it "the unfortunate position of women of India is due to the fact that women, being illiterate, are ignorant of their rights, and men, being callous, choose to keep them ignorant". (The Bombay Law Reporter; Journal 15-11-'36, pg. 123).

Zeenaat Shaukat Ali

## Difficulties of the Dialogue between Christians and Muslims

Dialogue between Christians and Muslims has always been a difficult endeavour, from the very origin of Islam. This is the first fact we have to face when studying the political, cultural and religious relations during the past 14 centuries, between social groups and persons shaped by the Gospel on the one hand and by the Koran on the other. And it is no surprise if matters are still in the same situation today, in spite of modest efforts, initiated on both sides, during the last twenty or thirty years, in order to reach a better reciprocal understanding of and respect for the essentials of the Muslim and Christian personality<sup>1</sup>. As an example, two French daily newspapers, reporting on the recent 'Abrahamistic International Encounter', held in Cordoba (Spain) and organized by Roger Garaudy, following an initiative from the Institute for the Dialogue of Cultures, introduced their information with these titles: 'The difficult dialogue between Abraham's estranged children' (*Le Monde*, 02/17/1987) and: 'The difficult dialogue between Abraham's sons' (*Le Figaro*, 02/17/1987). with the subtitle: 'Positions frequently impossible to reconcile'.

That three-cornered seminar included a small number of persons (20 Muslims, 12 Christians and 1 Jew, according

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1. Re our two essays on the same topic with the included bibliographies: *Le dialogue islamo chretien des dix dernieres annees* (The Muslim-Christian Dialogue during the last ten years). Special issue of *Pro Mundi Vita* (Brussels), No 74, Sept-Oct. 1978, 60 pp (large size). *Orientations pour un dialogue entre Chretiens et Musulmans* (Orientations for Christian-Muslim Dialogue). Paris, Le Cerf, 1981, 191 pp. (mainly pp. 173-179).

to *Le Monde*) who represented only themselves; there were no representatives of the Spanish Churches, for the good reason that they had organized their own conference, which took place in October 1986, also in Cordoba, with the agreement and participation of Muslims from the Islamic Center of Madrid, and with a different spirit and scope<sup>2</sup>. What does this mean? A first difficulty to be dealt with concerns the representative character of the partners, every time such encounters are organized. Should we recall that, at Assisi, on the Prayer Day of World Religions for Peace, on the 27th of October 1986, following an initiative from Pope John Paul II, there were very few Muslim participants? Actually, only an official delegation of three *ulama'* from Morocco and nine Muslim personalities came together under the sponsorship of the World Religion Conference for Peace<sup>3</sup>.

In Tunis, on 21st of April 1986, after the inaugural speech of the 4th Muslim and Christian Seminar, organized by the Center for Economical and Social Studies and Research of the Tunisian University, on the theme 'Spirituality, a requirement of our times'<sup>4</sup>, the Great Mufti of the Tunisian Republic was satisfied with a brief hand-shake with Cardinal Arinze, President of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, saying: 'Dialogue? Yes, but not only with words with deeds also!' It is also known that the Christian Muslim Encounter of Colombo, in March-April 1982, with participation of representatives of the Muslim World Congress, went through several difficult moments. Bishop Teissier, coadjutor to Cardinal Duval, Archbishop of Algiers commented that it was clear on the Christian that it was

2. The conclusions of this symposium are included in the section *Notes & Documents* of *Islamochristiana*, No. 13 (1987) PISAI, Rome.

3. The names of the participants and of their delegations, as well as the texts of the speeches and prayers, in *Documentation Catholique*, Paris, 21 Dec. 1986, No 1930.

4. Re. *The Fourth Muslim-Christian Encounter of Tunis* (21-26 April 1986): *Spirituality, a requirement of our time*, including testimonies by Stuart E. Brown, Thomas Langan and Muhammad 'Abid al-Gabri, in *Islamochristiana* No 12 (1986), pp. 163-179.

not possible to answer the posed question without endangering the whole meeting itself. For instance, when Christian participant voiced mixed feelings about the manner Islam and Christianity had been imposed in some areas of Africa, the reaction of the Muslim group was very hot: and one of the Muslim participants threatened to leave the meeting if another remark of that kind were made<sup>5</sup>.

So, difficulties still remain as numerous as ever. Some have always existed, and we have to be aware of them; they stand at the very heart of the view each side takes of the other. They represent the limits of any realistic and respectful dialogue. Some of these are the result of accumulated prejudices and/or sad experiences. Whether they have been inflicted deliberately or not, they need to be analyzed, criticized and overcome through dialogue and 'brotherly correction': each partner, in total equality, receives and expects criticism from the other side, and stands ready to revise his own judgments and to reform his behaviour. New obstacles have been added in the wake of present developments of history, or due to the slowness of some partners in revising their judgments and attitudes. There is real danger of concentrating on the difficulties, and implying that dialogue is impossible<sup>6</sup>.

How can we take into account old and new difficulties, in order to give to the dialogue of daily life a chance for genuine encounter and friendship. How can we enhance relations at both the human and the religious levels? Clarity and generosity are absolutely necessary here. This was acknowledged during a recent meeting, of the highest representatives of the Workers' Catholic Action (JOC) in France: they pointed out that it was hard for them to

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5. Re John B.X. Taylor, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Colombo, Sri Lanka, 30 March 1st April 1982, followed by two testimonies from participants (Henri Teissier and Michel Lelong) in *Islamochristiana*, No 8 (1982), pp. 201-205.

6. Re our previous article: *La porte étroite due dialogue Islamo-chretien* (The narrow gate to Muslim-Christian Dialogue), in *Revue Africaine de Theologie*, Kinshasa (Zaire), vol. 8 No 15, April 1984, pp. 47-63.

understand why some of their former Muslim friends had progressively drifted away from them, after they resumed the practice of their Islamic religious duties in the field of worship and community life. In sum what are the present difficulties of interpersonal dialogue? How do they emerge today in any organized dialogue between groups and associations which can be accepted as fair representatives of either side?

### **I. How can we overcome these difficulties in interpersonal dialogue?**

The places and ways of dialogue between two persons of different faiths who esteem each other and who wish to understand and help each other, are as numerous and varied as the links which can be spun between two human beings living together at school, at work, at home or in friendship. On the Christian side, how necessary it is to greet each other, to understand one another, to 'live with' and to share, to dare and to take risks as well. All this requires from a disciple of Jesus Christ an 'open spirituality' and an appreciation of all that is positive in the faith of non-Christian believers. If Christians and Muslims accept each other as 'believers involved in dialogue', they do so under God's gaze and inspiration. This should bring them to deeper conversion to God and, consequently, to mutual reconciliation. This means that we become for each other exacting witnesses capable of undergoing the impossible, and of accepting what is transient. For our religious claims to a universality for its message, in order to bring about the recapitulation of all things in its particular approach to the mystery of God.

Consequently, the believers are invited to liberate religious values, Christian as well as Muslim from the misdeeds of history which have been committed in their name, or which are falsely attributed to them: this undertaking has to be renewed constantly. Christians and Muslims alike know from experience that their view of the other partner is not immediate and fresh: They are

influenced, more or less, by ideas and images inherited from their forefathers or circulated in their social milieu; biased judgments and inveterate prejudices. These need to be rectified and reformed if one wishes encounters and cooperation to develop in a spirit of truth and charity, even in areas which may seem remote from faith, like science, technology and politics. For his share, the Christian has a duty to react against the subtle temptation of confusing Islam with fatalism, legalism, laxism, fanaticism, immobilism, etc.. Elements within the Muslim religion which can feed such evolutions are, at the same time, counter-balanced by other elements capable of evolution in the opposite direction. This can be ascertained from many facts and persons in the realm of Islam itself. Such elements do exist on the Christian side as well, and Christ's disciples must liberate Christianity from the same trends and temptations.

The presentation of Christianity made by Christians, and the presentation of Islam, coming from Muslims, often add to the difficulties which both parties experience in interpersonal dialogue. We shall see later how representative leaders or official institutions on both sides, are instrumental in improving or worsening these conditions taken as a whole. For the time being, it may be useful to recall how certain objective difficulties can still hamper the relations of friendship which believers are invited to foster between themselves. Living together, Muslims and Christians are frequently confronted with the difficult problem of forbidden foods: They hurt their partners, even without knowing it. Christians should be informed of the alimentary habits of their Muslim friends, and prepare meals and drinks in such a way that everyone can feel at ease, the Muslim in his fidelity to food prescriptions of his religious tradition, and the Christian in his freedom as a disciple of Christ who has come to make lawful and good all sorts of food and drink, since it is the evil "which proceeds from the heart" that "makes a man unclean" (Mt. 14: 17-18). In this way, each one is left with his/her conscience and liberty!

Nevertheless, Christians will always suffer a fourfold suspicion, which as their Muslim friends entertain could be formulated as follows:

1. The Scriptures of the Christians have been falsified.
2. The Christian mysteries are useless additions.
3. The monotheism of the Christians is not so pure as they pretend.
4. Christians have been unfaithful to Jesus' message.

So, we are always coming back to the fundamental problem, as it was presented during the first Muslim and Christian Conference of Cordoba, in 1974<sup>7</sup>. Is each side prepared to listen, with a high degree of understanding and a steady spirit of sympathy, to what the other partner has to say about his own faith, his religious tradition and the God whom he wishes to serve and worship? Is everyone ready then to accept the questioning of the other partner about this religious experience, so that he may explain it, with particular attention to the less known sides of it or its misunderstood dimensions, without any trace of polemical overtones, but with love for one's faith and due respect for the partner's faith? In this way, each one could be allowed to speak about the religion of his partner to a third party with thorough honesty and fidelity. The ideal would then be that a Christian could present Islam in such a way that Muslims would recognize themselves in this presentation, and that a Muslim could present Christianity in such a way that Christians would fully agree with his presentation.

## II. How can we relativize these difficulties inside a formal dialogue?

Has any stretch of road been covered during the last few years, as far as formal dialogue is concerned? This question immediately brings up another one, which is even more important: which representative institutions have been

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7. Re. Emilio Galindo Aguilar *Cordoue, capitale califale du dialogue islamo-chretien* (Cordoba, the caliphal capital of Muslim-Christian Dialogue), in *Islamochristiana* No. 1 (1975), pp. 103-114.

able to come forward, on both sides, and who are the responsible personalities? There is the problem of touchy relationship between majority and minority in many countries where religious membership spurs more acute arguments. There is the almost impossible hurdle of two universal missions coming to grips, competing with each other or ignoring each other. There is always the risk also of a dialogue which is reduced to mere cultural, social or political dimensions, leaving in the dark the essential problem of seeking God within the present world conditions. Finally, there is the difficulty of an almost impossible common interpretation of what is meant by human rights. Such are the major difficulties which we intend to tackle in this presentation.

#### **A. The problem of representative institutions**

Churches have their institutions, the authority of which can vary considerably from one to the other: among them, we have those which express the dogmatic positions (magisterium) and the pastoral orientations, as in the Roman Catholic Church or the Orthodox Churches, others are seen as practical means to translate a common agreement on the wording of the faith, or to determine how each denomination should take its own individual action, as in the World Council of Churches. The same thing cannot be said of the Muslim partners, who frequently herald a complete freedom for personal interpretation, within the frame of the consensus of the world islamic community, the expression of which is far from being well defined. As for the Catholic Church, in the wake of the 2nd Vatican Council, she now has a special Secretariat for the Non-Christians (Pentecost 1964), which has developed commissions dedicated to the fostering of interreligious dialogue. The same thing happened inside the World Council of Churches, with its subcommission for dialogue with the followers of Beliefs and Ideologies of our time, created in 1969/1971, with its head-office in Geneva. It is these two institutions or derived groups in connection with them, which have initiated the numerous attempts of the last few years in

what regards Muslim and Christian dialogue. Nothing of that kind exists on the Muslim side, where only independent personalities or the aforementioned Tunisian CERES (Center for Economical and Social Studies and Research) have come forward, the latter through four significant encounters.

The three Islamic International Organizations<sup>8</sup> which appear as relaying the unifying function of the Caliphate of old (abrogated by Kamal Attaturk in 1924) (These 3 organizations are respectively the World Muslim Congress, created in 1926, the League of the Muslim in 1962, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1969) do not seem to be interested in an organized dialogue, even if one of them did take part in the Colombo Seminar in 1982. A recent open letter from Pr. Mohamed Talbi, a Tunisian involved in dialogue since long ago, asking the Organization of the Islamic Conference to create its own commission for interreligious dialogue, is still waiting for an answer! A thousand signs are confirming that official representatives of Islam are reluctant, if not deaf, regarding formal dialogue with representative institutions of other monotheistic religions. There is a lack of balance in the search for dialogue; the reasons for that are numerous, and most probably impossible to overcome at the very level of the organization of relationship between "Religion and State" in the countries with an Islamic tradition. For instance, in April 1978, the highest authorities of al-Azhar University in Cairo refused to use the word "dialogue" (hiwar) itself, substituting the more simple term of "encounter", when they greeted Cardinal Pignedoli, the late President of the Secretariat for Non Christians.

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8. For a deeper acquaintance with the history and management of these "Islamic organizations", see *Etudes Arabes (Dossiers)*, PISA, Rome, No. 66, 1984/1: *Les Organisations Islamiques Internationales* (The World Islamic Organizations), 121 pp.

**B. How difficult it is for responsible officials to get an objective knowledge of other people's thinking**

This is another deficiency which puts a burden on dialogue: actually it is found on both sides, but one must admit that a tremendous effort has been made on the Christian side to provide everyone with a sound and objective knowledge regarding the thought and the way of life of Muslims. As witnesses to that, we have scores of periodicals and books published during the last years; and this effort has been acknowledged by the Muslim partners. One can only regret that similar steps have not been taken on the other side. What should we think of Sheikh Abdal-Halim Mahmud's (d. in 1978) endeavour of translating into Arabic Charles Guignebert's books, under the title of *Christianity, its origin and its evolution* in order to establish, as he writes in his own preface to his book, that "the Westerners have never been genuine Christians not even a single day"<sup>9</sup> ?... More recently, on the occasion of a lecture delivered in Rome, in 1985, the Great Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Kaftaro, could affirm that there is "in the Koran, much more information about the sayings and deeds of Jesus" (93 verses out of 6.236) than what can be found in the whole book of the Gospel (the 4 Canonical Gospels include a total of 89 chapters, each one of them with an average of 30 verses)<sup>10</sup>!

In another book, published in 1980 by the Egyptian Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali, one of the first thinkers of the Muslim Brothers and now the Rector of the Islamic

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9. *al-Masahiyya, nas 'atu-ha wa tatawwuru-ha*, Savda-Bayrut, al-Maktaba al-'asriyya, not dated, 209 pp. During the last few years, this Sheikh has taken part in the codification of juridical texts from the 4 major canonical schools, and in the setting up of a "standard model" of Islamic Constitution and Koranic Penalty Law.

10. *Re. Italie: Cycle de Conférences organise par le Comité d'amitié islamo-chrétienne de la Communauté de San Egidio* (Italy: Round of Lectures organized by the committee for Muslim-Christian friendship of the San Egidio community), in *Islamochristiana* No 12 (1986) pp 209-211.

University of Constantine, in Algeria, under the title of *The Islamic mission at the dawn of the 15th Century* i.e., according to the Hegira calendar<sup>11</sup>, we find this most surprising statement: "Christianity as spread today by human beings... is a contradiction of everything given in the heavenly Messages, since it is a philosophy which upholds that Jesus is a god or a semi-god... This new version of Christianity has nothing to do with 'Isa who has paved the way for Muhammad; it is only a human doctrine, which has grown independently from what has come down before it as well as after it." (pp. 170-71) How much one would like to see that tomorrow in the literature using the Arabic medium, there grows a new crop of books which can present with accuracy the Faith of Christians, as it was done, for example and rather successfully, by Mr. Abd al-Aziz Kamil in his lecture at the Cordoba Conference (1974) under the title: *An Islamic presentation of Christianity in such a way that a Christian can agree with it*<sup>12</sup>

### C. The effort to renew information and formation

Ignorance breeds prejudices and false or incomplete information multiplies misunderstandings! Where do we stand today in regard to messages about the faith and religious practices of others as proposed by mass media and schoolbooks? Many an Islamic and Christian encounter has rightly insisted on the necessity to revise everything. For sure, each country has its own reading of history; nevertheless, it is appropriate that the viewpoint of others should be presented as well, to inform the public at large and to educate the new generations. As an example, the Tunisian review of the Management of Religious Affairs, *al-Hidaya* (July-Sept. 1985), expressed satisfaction after the publishing, in Paris, of a schoolbook entitled: *All are Sons of Abraham* (pp. 89-91). So, a non negligible effort is

11. *al-Da'wa al-islamiyya tas'iqbilu qarna-ha al-hamisa 'asar*, s. 1. Dar al-salasil, 1400 A. H. / 1980 C. E., 235 pp.

12. in *al-Islam wa-l mustaqbal*, coll. *Iqra'*, Cairo, Dar al-ma'arif, 1975, pp. 138-151.

under way on the Christian side, in what regards the great historical religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism.

A recent survey of the school handbooks for Islamic teaching in Turkey reveals an almost fearsome presentation of Christianity<sup>13</sup>. Explorations through similar books in use in Arab countries can only sadden any Christian observer, who cannot recognize his faith in these books. How could matters be improved in this difficult domain? Exhibitions, festivals, museums, everything is available in Western countries, in order to give a fair account of Islam! Is it possible to say that the same thing is true of the traditionally Islamic countries? There is no lack of responsible people and experts who could boldly work on that matter, within joint commissions: for it is absolutely necessary that from the time of his/her school years, a Christian pupil should know with accuracy the basics of the faith and religious practices of his/her Muslim friend, just as it is urgent that any Muslim pupil get a chance to discover also the basics of the faith and religious practices of his/her Christian friend.

#### **D. The negative consequences of social and political problems still in search for an answer**

The touchy question of religious minorities is frequently a stumbling block which can result in a dialogue of the deaf between Christians and Muslims, and this in all good faith! The former will bring forward the harsh situation of Christians in Cyprus (where the intervention of the Turkish Army, in 1974, resulted in bringing 1/3 of the island under control of Muslims, who represent only 18% of the population); in Lebanon (where interdenominational clashes have pervaded the country for more than ten years now, like an endlessly bleeding wound); in the Sudan (where in the Southern provinces, Christians and animists alike, are in a smouldering and recurring state of rebellion); in Senegal (with the Murid pretention in the North, and

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13. Re. Xavier Jacob, *Le Christianisme vu par les Turcs*, (Christianity as seen by the Turks) in *Se Comprendre* (Paris), in 1984/10, 29 Nov. 1984, 17 pp.

the claim to autonomy in the rather Christian province of Casamance); in Malaysia (where Islamic groups have expressed their resentment against the Christian Prime Minister of Sabha); in Egypt (where Christian churches and shops are periodically set fire to); and the numerous Christian workers in Saudi Arabia (who are deprived of minimal religious assistance). As for the Muslims, they insist on the hardships of their brothers in the Philippines (re. the difficult setting of an autonomy status in Mindanao and the Sulu Islands); in Bulgaria (where the Turkish minority is culturally "bulgarized"); in Ethiopia/Erythrea (where the 60% of Muslims would be submitted to a "Christian" Government); in Indonesia (where the secular political power is said to bring disadvantages to Muslims); in Western Europe and the U.S.A. (where Muslim expatriates would be ill-respected in what regards their social and religious rights); let alone the heart-rending problems of Afghanistan and Palestine, always presented as concerns of the world Islamic community in the first place.

The basic reason for these difficulties is to be found first in the lack of balance bred by the coexistence of majority and minority groups within a society which strives to achieve a working pluralism. Then comes the different visions of Christians and Muslims regarding the relationship between Religion and State. Christians cannot understand the claims to religious autonomy coming from Muslim minorities, specially when they introduce divergent cultural, juridical, judicial and even political dimensions. On the other hand, Muslims are surprised that their Christian partners refuse the 'protection status' (*dhimma*) as heralded by the classical Islamic state, and ask to be accepted as full citizens of modern societies, where as a rule, Constitutions grant to all citizens equal opportunities and rights<sup>14</sup>.

Who would not see how dangerous are the recent attempts to enforce more or less completely the Islamic

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14. For this question of Constitutions in Muslim countries, see *Etudes Arabes (Dossiers)*, No 72, 1987 1; *Islam, Din al-dawla - L'Islam, religion de l'Etat* (Islam as religion of the State), 130 pp.

Law, known as the 'shari'a' in some countries with an Islamic tradition, especially when all non-Muslim citizens are asked to comply in obvious contradiction with the securities granted to them by the classical status of 'protected citizens' (*dhimmis*)<sup>15</sup>. The fundamentalistic movements represent hazards which can obstruct dialogue or suppress it completely. According to these movements, Islam must be everywhere the religion of the State and its religious law ought to be heralded as the first or the principal source of any legislation. However, history itself of the Muslim countries shows that there has been frequently a subtle distinction between State and Religion; and it is no mean merit of the last document proposed by a joint group of French speaking Christian and Muslim intellectuals (G.R.I.C.), to have attempted an intelligent re-reading of that question ('State and Religion: the situation in both Christianity and Islam'), in order to draw up guidelines for religious pluralism in modern societies<sup>16</sup>.

#### E. The enduring mistrust as a result of the missionary endeavour of both Muslims and Christians

People involved in dialogue, if they are true believers, must allow one another the right for apostolate, and even the duty to be a missionary. The requirements of the Christian mission and the Muslim *da'wa* are a fact, and it is only commendable that everyone should take it into account. A Christian should not wonder at the realization that contemporary Islam has recovered its missionary dimension and intends to expand it to the five continents. Christians should try to understand its guidelines, just as Muslims should try to grasp the reasons and methods of the Chris-

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15. More about this problem of application of the Shari'a in *Etudes Arabes (Dossiers)* No 70-71, PISAI, Rome, 1986, *Debats autour de l'application de la sari'a*, 240 pp.

16. Re Groupe de Recherches Islamo-Chretien (G.R.I.C.), *Etat et Religion (State and Religion)*, in *Islamochristiana*; No 12 (1986) PISAI' Rome, pp. 49-72.

tian mission. Fruitless polemics are to be put aside and replaced by a holy competition of good deeds on behalf of the poor and the needy.

Unfortunately, accumulated reproofs on both sides are countless: do we have to recall them indefinitely? Christians must know what their partners think of the Christian mission through history: they may have depicted a false image of Islam; or aimed at influencing the weakest and the poorest through a blackmailing proselytism of economic, medical and educational assistance in exchange for adherence to the faith; or have shown an aggressive attitude towards Islam; or have looked upon Muslims as political rivals. For the Muslims, the Christian mission is essentially linked with colonialism and is still connected with imperialism and zionism. On the other hand, it would be to the advantage of Muslims to listen to the complaints of their Christian friends regarding economical and moral pressures as part of the Islamic *da'wa*; if Muslims discredit the Crusades, the Christians are critical of Islamic conquests which took place before the Crusades! And it is really unfortunate that the books and periodicals which are the voice of the present Islamic *da'wa*, are still keeping a polemical approach against Christianity and the Christians (as an evidence to this, one can turn to No. 49, Dec. 1986, of *Risalat al-Gihad*! published in Libya by the Tripoli Association for the Da'wa) <sup>17</sup>.

Even if we accept as a fact that both mission and *da'wa* will remain for a long time a thorn in the flesh of dialogue between Christians and Muslims, at least we do hope that courageous believers will give each other an explanation of mission and *da'wa*: in order to achieve a better definition of the criteria of legitimate mission and illegitimate mission; of the requirements and limitations of religious freedom; and of the possibilities for cooperation in the field of assistance to the refugees, to the hungry

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17. More on that matter of the Islamic Da'wa in *Etudes Arabes (Dossiers)*, No 73.1987/2.

and to the illiterate. Such an effort has been given a try in Geneva-Chambesy (June 1976): in spite of the obstacles, this should be tried again, for the sake of God's honour and of unselfish help given to men and women of our times.

#### **F. More or less diverging interpretation of Human Rights, as far as their application is concerned**

Can an identical view of human rights bring together Muslims and Christians today, and serve as a common Charter within the frame of a pluralistic society? Such a programme should be possible since we are speaking of two monotheistic groups which seem to be rooted in the same biblical anthropology. Yet, it is to no avail; it generates difficulties of a particular order. As evidence, we can mention that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, as published at the UNESCO Headquarters, in Paris, 19 Sept. 1981, by the Islamic Council of Europe (a private organization founded in London in 1965), has not been officially upheld by any of the Governments which are members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. This Declaration was an attempt at reconciliation with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the U.N. (1948), which many Muslim countries have not yet signed or sanctioned. Actually, it is quite remote from the United Nations text and, at best, it is an edition of the Islamic Law itself, using a language more adapted to accepted international vocabulary in these matters; it is a praiseworthy effort indeed, but one that remains close to the traditional interpretation of Islam. The texts released for public use bear witness to this fact: the Arabic text is full of Koranic quotations and references to the Sunna, while the French and English translations do not include them, so as to remain at the level of secular Western language<sup>18</sup>.

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18. For a collection of documents, their history and analysis, related to Human Rights in Islam, see the special issue of *Islamochristiana* No 9 (1983), under the title of: *Droits de l'Homme, Human Rights*

If a certain number of basic values are jointly upheld by both Muslims and Christians (the right to life, to freedom, to justice, to a fair hearing in court, to family, etc.) nevertheless their interpretations differ. They get entangled in the classical Islamic Law, the Shari'a. Muslims themselves disagree on the matter of its content, its sources, and its limits. The problem gets complicated when the necessity arises to submit all that to the prevailing 'public order' in this or that country. Many Christians are puzzled: why should they obey a restrictive interpretation of human rights within a 'public order' inspired by Islam, while their Muslim friends can enjoy, in a 'Western' context, the numerous facilities provided by a generous and liberal interpretation of the same human rights? Very hot questions indeed, which would require to be dealt with more frequently, serenely and concretely, on the occasion of symposiums, encounters and seminars for dialogue <sup>19</sup>.

## Conclusion

Such are, the numerous difficulties which exist presently along the path of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. It would not be realistic to deny them or to keep them in the dark, just as it would be a sin against hope to look at them as if they were insuperable obstacles. It is because difficulties have piled up that dialogue is now more necessary than ever. Christians and Muslims are at present living side by side everywhere in the world: consequently, their dialogue must expand to a world dimension, but success depends on the quality of each interpersonal dialogue, both at the human and spiritual levels.

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19. This last problem is given a wide coverage in the last part of our lecture to the French Bishops, at Lourdes, 29 Oct. 1986, and published in *Pour que le monde croie* (So that the World may believe), Paris, Centurion, 1986, 197 pp., under the significant title of: *L'Islam contemporain et les problèmes qu'il pose aux Musulmans et aux Chrétiens* (Present day Islam and the problems it raises for both Muslims and Christians), pp. 111-132

At the present stage, it is important that all representative bodies, on both sides, meet and explain themselves in a spirit of complete fairness and equality in a search for solutions which, though incomplete, could be regarded as real and liberating answers to the problems we have exposed here. Muslim and Christian dialogue requires more than ever genuine witnesses, experts and saints. Christians can follow in the steps of John Paul II on the 15th of August 1985: he said to young Moroccan Muslims: "I believe, that God invites us today to change our old habits. We owe it to each other to be mutually respectful and to stimulate each other with good deeds in the way of God."<sup>20</sup> It is to ascertain this respect and to warrant this emulation that it is necessary to take the right measure of present difficulties, so as to reduce their weight and suppress their causes, and to allow a genuine dialogue to yield all its fruit in terms of human collaboration and religious progress towards each other, for the joy of humankind and the honour of God.

Maurice Borrmans

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20. John Paul II's speech to the Moroccan Youth, in Casablanca, is presented in French, Arabic & English, with 12 commentaries in the review *Seminarium*, Rome, Congr. for Seminaries & Universities, Anno XXXVIII, nova series: anno XXVI, No. 1 - Januario-Martio 1986, 240 pp.

## Discussion Forum

### Bible on Suffering

The March issue of *Jeevadhara* is a significant scholarly discussion of the Biblical texts on suffering. Approach to human suffering in the figure of the Ebed Yahweh, in the Psalms, in the Lamentations and in the agony of Christ in the Gospels especially of St Mark presents a varied and comprehensive theology of suffering determined by the different contexts and personalities presented in the Bible. But I should submit that I see a problem in this discussion: It could be presented anywhere in the world. There is very little indication in the journal that this Biblical meditation on suffering is made in India against the actual context of the suffering millions of our country and against the background of the Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions that paid the greatest attention among all World Religions to the problem of suffering. The editor and the writers of the *Jeevadhara* issue on Suffering do not seem to realize that Biblical revelation has two poles, the immutable side of the revealing God and the part of the human beings living in the changing situation of day to day existence, reverently listening to God's Word and confidently announcing it.

Indeed, the main concern of Biblical scholars is to bring out the meaning and content of the Biblical message. For this they try to find out what a particular text meant for God's people at the time it was written, particularly to those to whom it was immediately addressed. Great effort is also made to explore the details concerning the personality and background of the writer and what exactly he intended to convey to his readers.

But this preoccupation with the author and his cultural background and the particular socio-cultural situation and problems of the people to whom a particular text was addressed should not blind one to the fact that the text has a reality of its own. Philosophers of hermeneutics like Gadamer and Ricoeur apply this transcendence to all texts. Even a historically situated text like Plato's *Republic* is struggling through the cultural undergrowth to arrive at some universal truth. So all textual interpretation needs a sort of hermeneutical arch liberating the text from its original cultural individuality and reincarnating it in the concrete situation of the reader today. This is particularly true of the sacred text which expresses a message affecting the deepest concerns of man. In it the author himself was trying to grasp the ungraspable and express the inexpressible. So the text has a meaning far transcending the limited understanding and time-bound concerns of the author and the grasp of the immediate audience as well. The unique Scriptural exegetical method of St. Ephrem and of the Antiochian school in general was not to restrict oneself to the literal meaning of the text, nor to go looking for spiritual, symbolical or allegorical meaning in it simply for spiritual instruction and edification, but to see the text as addressed to people today with an immediate relevance for their life. This is a basic principle of true hermeneutics: any text, secular or sacred, should be lifted from its original cultural context and time-place situation and made relevant to the reader today.

In India to find the sociological meaning of the Biblical texts on suffering one need not go looking for the writings of Leonardo Boff in Brazil! Read through the aching hearts of the millions of poor in our country the Ebed Yahweh texts come out as the collective cry of the just suffering injustice. The agony of Jesus is not simply the sufferings of a particular individual who lived two thousand years ago but is continued in 'the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who

re poor or in any way afflicted'. The Buddhist and Hindu texts on suffering are not just illustrations to show that "others" also are talking about suffering, but the very background music for the Biblical proclamation, making it relevant and meaningful. The figure of Prajapati emptying himself and dying in his sacrifice of creation, and the image of the compassionate Buddha offering himself for the liberation of creation and the like should determine the lines and shadows, nuances and emphases in the Biblical image of the suffering Saviour.

Biblical scholarship that ignores the actual context of the listeners of the Word is doing an injustice to divine revelation. It ignores one member of the God-man conversation and makes it a divine monologue! It is not a really scientific approach to the text of Scripture, nor to any other text for that matter. I do not think that in this respect the March issue of *Jeevadhara* has done proper justice to the Biblical texts on suffering. Perhaps this is a basic problem that affects the teaching of Sacred Scripture as a whole in our seminaries. In the name of scientific impartiality a sacred text is considered in isolation from the concrete situation of its readers and its relevance and message for them!

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